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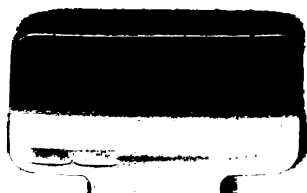
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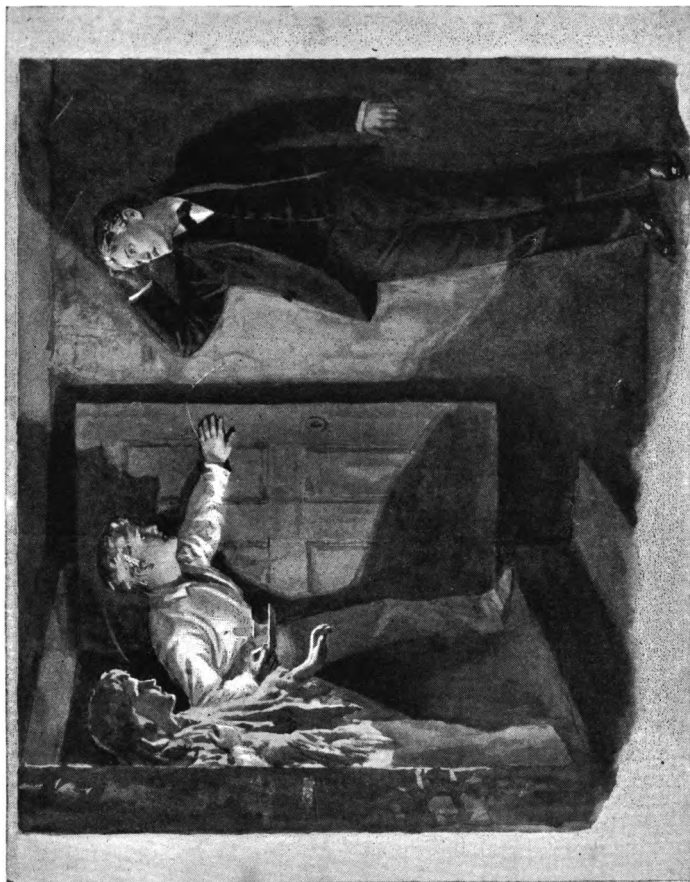


Grayling Towers

Molesworth

2527. E. A. C. G.





The door yielded, . . . half knocking down the figure leaning
against the wall at one side.

PAGE 244.

GREYLING TOWERS

A STORY FOR THE YOUNG

BY

MRS MOLESWORTH

AUTHOR OF 'MEG LANGHOLME,' 'PHILIPPA,' 'OLIVIA,'
'ROBIN REDBREAST,' &c.

WITH SEVENTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

PERCY TARRANT

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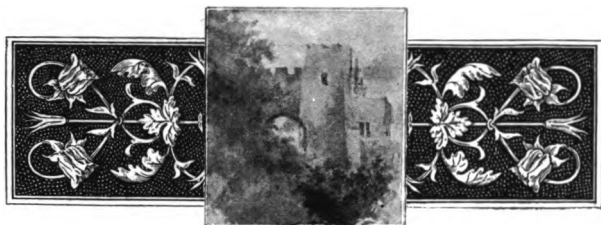
**I DEDICATE THIS
LITTLE STORY TO MY GODSON,
LAURENCE**

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GREYLING TOWERS.

CHAPTER I.

WELCOME NEWS.

T was a very dull day—a really dull day; slow, steady, hopeless rain, with no break in the gray, cloudy sky, no excitement of thinking that perhaps it was going to clear up and turn out a fine afternoon in the end.

The children had not minded so much in the morning. They had their lessons to do, which kept their thoughts busy; and, besides, in the morning people are always fresher.

But after the usual time for their going a walk had passed, and there were still almost two hours to tea-time, their spirits did begin to go down.

‘It makes it worse,’ said Amy, ‘when you think that it’s the spring, and it *should* be beginning to be bright and sunny.’

She was sitting on the rocking-horse, though not rocking. Indeed, she was really rather too big to get on it at all, for she was eleven past.

‘But it can’t always be bright and sunny,’ said Viva, the sister next in age. Viva’s way was to look at things sensibly. ‘There do come days even in the very middle of summer when it’s nearly as dull as to-day. Don’t you remem——?’

‘Oh, bother, Viva!’ interrupted Amy, ‘what is the good of talking like that? If you’ve got a pain to-day, does it make it any better to be reminded that you had one last week too?’

Viva did not at once answer. Not that she felt at all snubbed—Viva was not easily snubbed; but it often took her some little time to think over what Amy said so as to understand it clearly. Amy was too quick for her.

‘Amy is so clever,’ Viva used to think to herself modestly. Though in reality, down at the bottom of her heart, Amy, on her side, had a great respect for Viva’s opinion.

‘It isn’t only about to-day being rainy that I mind,’ the elder little sister went on. ‘It’s all our life! I do think it is so dull. One day after another much the same. Breakfast, dinner, and tea—history, jography, French, German, writing, sums; going to bed and getting up, and then all beginning again just the same.’

‘There’s dancing twice a week,’ said Viva, rather timidly—dancing lessons were a great treat to Viva—‘and there’s holidays sometimes.’

‘Oh, you *are* stupid!’ said Amy. ‘Of course it’s not always ’xactly the same, but it is in a way—regular sort of going on—not like the kind of things you read about in books.’

‘There aren’t any fairies now,’ said another voice, breaking in unexpectedly, ‘if that’s what you mean?’ and a sigh followed.

The speaker was Doff—short for Adolphus—and Doff was the younger brother of Amy and Viva. He was eight years old, and the thing he cared for most in the world was fairy stories. Just now he was sitting with his legs crossed like a Turk on the window-sill—for the house in the square was old-fashioned and roomy—and on his knee was the volume of *Grimm* which had been his most valued Christmas present.

‘No, that isn’t what I mean,’ said Amy. ‘I mean things that *might* be. Oh!’ as the door opened, ‘there’s Ken; he’ll understand.—Ken,’ she went on, turning to her elder

brother, 'don't you agree with me that we have *very* dull lives?'

Kenelm opened his eyes very wide, then he dropped his books, which he had been carrying in a strap, on the floor beside him, and sat down in the old rocking-chair.

'I don't know what you are talking about,' he said. 'It's a horrid rainy day, if that's what you mean; but I like Wednesdays, because I get back an hour earlier.'

Kenelm was not at present, strictly speaking, a schoolboy. He was going to a big school next year, and in the meantime was working with a private tutor, as the preparatory school he had been at had changed hands a few months before.

Amy's face fell, but she did not like to answer Kenelm as sharply as Viva.

'You would understand if you'd been in here all the afternoon, with nothing to do, and the rain going on without stopping for a single minute, and'——

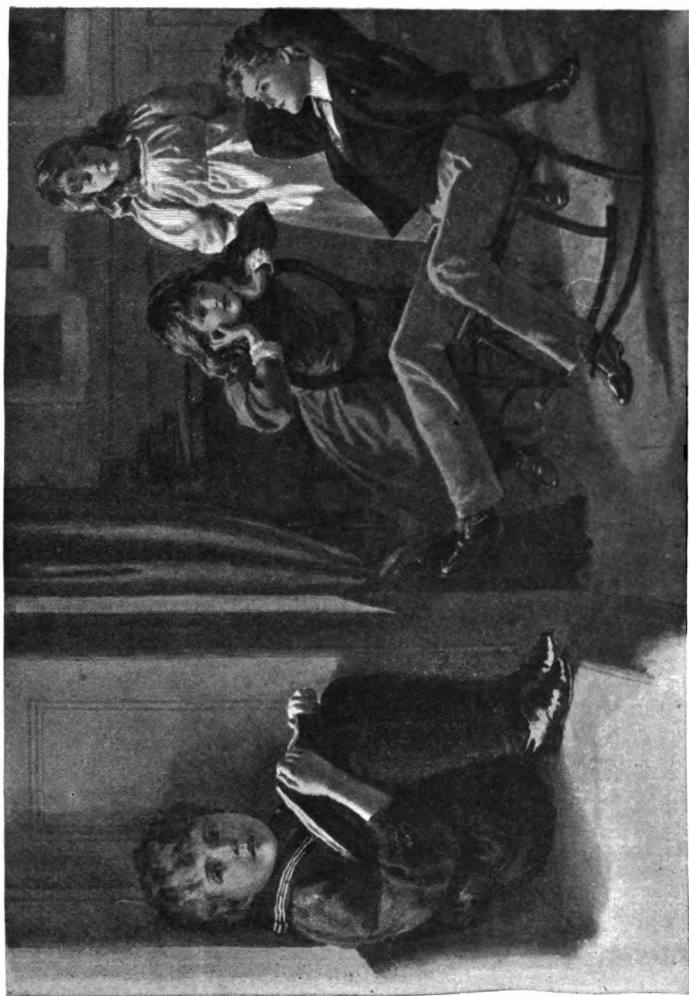
'You might get something to do if you liked,' said Kenelm, rocking himself backwards and forwards. He certainly did not seem in a very sympathising humour.

'Do leave off rocking,' said Amy, 'and listen to me. You can understand if you like. What I was saying when you came in, only Viva was so stupid, and the little ones can't understand, of course'—with a slight jerk of her head towards Doff, by this time so deep in his *Fairy Tales* again that his feelings ran no risk of being hurt—'what I was saying was, that our lives are so—always-the-same—regular, you know. I can't find quite the right word—common something.'

'Commonplace,' said Kenelm.

'Yes,' said Amy, with emphasis, 'that's it!' and she brightened up with satisfaction. 'One day just like another, except, of course, for changes that come regularly too. It's not the least like in story-books.'

'Lots of story-books aren't true,' said Viva.



'Do leave off rocking,' said Amy.

‘But some are,’ persisted Amy. ‘Think of those stories of the French Revolution, and of longer ago than that—nothing but adventures.’

‘Thank you,’ said Kenelm. ‘I certainly don’t agree with you in wishing to live through French Revolutions and things like that.’

‘But I don’t,’ said Amy; ‘you take me up so. There might be adventures not as bad as that. Now, if we lived in the country, in some big old house, we might almost make them for ourselves. Just fancy! a house with a secret staircase, and turret chambers, and dungeons, and moats! What lovely fancy-ings we might have! And here in London every bit of the house is just like any other house. You couldn’t lose your way the least little bit if you tried.’

In spite of himself, Amy’s words struck Kenelm, and, half in fun and half in earnest, he carried on her ideas.

‘I *have* seen a house like that,’ he said, ‘down at Railey, when I was staying at Uncle Frank’s last year. Some friends of theirs live in the most wonderful sort of old castle, and I remember thinking how awfully jolly it would be if we were all there together. There was a hall filled with armour, and when the wind came down the great chimney all the armour rattled and clanked! Oh, you would have been frightened, Amy!’

Amy did not deny it, but her eyes grew brighter and brighter; and even Viva opened her mouth as if that would help her to hear better.

‘I shouldn’t like anything quite so frightening as that,’ said Amy. ‘But we might have adventures, mysteries, and that kind of thing—just to be interesting, you know, and out of the common.’

Again there came the voice from the window-sill. In the intervals between one story and another—and *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, as every-

body knows, are short—Doff gave himself a little rest and listened to what was going on around him.

‘Like the table that came up with nice things to eat on all ready,’ he said. ‘That wouldn’t be frightening.’

‘Oh no, Doff,’ said Viva. ‘We are talking of possible things. That would be magic.’

Doff did not reply. He had begun another story by this time.

‘The sort of thing *I* should like,’ said Kenelm, ‘would be to be somewhere near caves, some jolly, rocky seashore, where there used to be pirates and smugglers, and secret passages through caverns—not a stupid, flat, sandy place like Coving.’

‘I shouldn’t care so much about that,’ said Amy, ‘because, you see, we know there aren’t any smugglers and pirates now. I should like some *real* adventure—some mystery that there might really be something to find out about. But it’s no use hoping for anything’—with a

deep sigh. 'Here we shall go on, day after day, just the same, till July, and then we'll go to Coving, and everything will be just like every year.'

Almost before she had finished speaking the door opened and a little girl came in—quite a little girl, looking not more than five—though in reality she was nearly two years older. She was slight and pale, with dark hair like her brother Kenelm, and gray eyes, with a rather melancholy expression. This was Dora, the baby of the family. She was very unlike her two elder sisters, who had bright hair, rosy cheeks, and lively brown eyes.

'What have you been doing, Dorrie,' said Amy, 'all this long time with mamma? You've had a much nicer afternoon than we have had.'

'I've not been doing noth—anything,' said the little girl. 'I've just been sitting 'aside mamma with my shells. And mamma's coming now this minute to tell you something.'

‘To tell us something!’ repeated Amy, jumping off the rocking-horse as she spoke, and going up to her little sister eagerly. ‘Something nice?’

‘I’m not to tell,’ the child replied; ‘it’s a secret.’

‘A secret!’ cried Amy. ‘How lovely! Just when I was saying—— Oh mamma!’ she broke off as she caught sight of her mother’s face at the door, ‘Dorrie says you’ve something to tell us.’

‘So I have,’ said Mrs Landor, smiling, as she sat down in the rocking-chair, which Kenelm at once jumped up to offer her.

‘Something nice?’ said Amy, repeating her question to Dorrie.

‘That must be for you to judge of when you have heard it,’ said her mother.

‘It’s always darkest before dawn,’ said Kenelm. ‘Amy’s been grumbling and grumbling, mamma, at everything being so dull, and nothing ever happening out of the common.’

I believe she'd think anything nice that was a change.'

'Well, my news certainly means a change,' said Mrs Landor, 'and I hope you will think it, at least in part, good news, as I do. It begins with a piece of business. We have sold this house, which you know, I think, we have been wanting to do for a good long time. The new one which we hope to get will not be ready till next autumn—not till October probably; and as the purchasers of this one want to come into it almost at once, we shall be homeless!'

Viva looked at her mother in some consternation.

'Oh mamma! that sounds dreadful,' she said. 'I don't think it nice at all.'

'Couldn't we get a cart?' said Doff. 'Those carts that are like houses, that gipsy sort of people live in.'

Mamma smiled both at Doff's proposal and Viva's alarm.

'I think we may do better than that,' she said. 'You shouldn't take fright before you have heard the whole story, Viva.'

'I think it's beautiful,' said Amy. 'I do love changes. But, oh, mamma, I hope we shan't go to Coving. Couldn't we go to—what was the name of that place, Ken, that you were telling us about just now, where you went to with Uncle Frank? Oh mamma, it was such a beautiful place! An old, old house, like a castle, with all sorts of wonders about it!'

'But is it to let?' said Mrs Landor.

'Of course not,' said Kenelm. 'Amy is silly. I don't remember the name of the place, mamma, but I dare say you've been there. It's never to let. The people live in it themselves always. I went there to luncheon with Uncle Frank when I was at Railey.'

'I think you must mean Morpheston Castle,' said Mrs Landor. 'Yes, it's a beautiful old place. But certainly we couldn't hope to get a country house like that.'

'Then we *are* going to get a country house,' said Amy quickly, and all the faces lighted up with pleasure, except Dorrie's; for, as she had known this good news for at least ten minutes, she felt herself in a superior position.

'If you had not interrupted me so often,' said their mother, 'you would have heard this already. Yes, we are going to look for a country house at once. Won't it be a great treat to be out of London for six months, and those six the nicest months of the year, instead of only for two or three?'

'It's perfectly delightful,' said Amy. 'I'll never think again that nothing nice happens when you want it.'

'It wouldn't be nice if it happened when you didn't want it,' said Kenelm; but to this remark Amy did not condescend to reply.

'Have you any idea where we shall go, mamma?' she continued. 'Any way, it won't be Coving, as that's not the country—that's the seaside.'

'We have heard of several houses,' said her mother; 'but as we were not sure of having to leave this one so soon, till a letter came about it this morning, we have not settled anything.'

'If we could but see them all,' said Amy, 'to choose. At least, I mean help you to choose, mamma.'

Her mother laughed.

'I am afraid,' she said, 'it would take us a very long time to decide if the whole family travelled about to look at the different places. We should need to hire Doff's van on purpose.'

Doff, who had forgotten his *Fairy Tales* for the moment in the interest of listening, looked up. He was a very persistent child, and he had a great dislike to being laughed at.

'I think a cart-house would be much the nicest,' he said. 'We could get quite a new one, all nicely painted. Or we might have two,' as this bright idea suddenly struck him; 'one for us and one for the servants.'

'I am afraid you wouldn't find it so pleasant

as you think, Doff. There are rainy days, remember, in spring and summer as well as in winter, and in the country as well as in town,' answered his mother.

'Oh mamma!' said Amy, 'do promise one thing. Do try to get a house with something out-of-the-way about it—very old, or queer inside, with twisted staircases and turrets, and funnily-shaped rooms, or at least *something* different from other houses. We do *so* want to have some adventures.'

'I don't think,' said Kenelm, 'that it matters so much about the house itself. You can't have adventures in your own house, unless it's some great big castle. The thing is to be at an interesting *place*. Caverns, I told Amy, would be the best fun.'

'But we can't have caverns, except near the sea,' said Viva, 'and we all agree that we don't want to go to the seaside.'

'Can you tell us anything about the houses you've heard of already, mamma?' said Amy.

Mrs Lander took two or three letters out of her pocket.

‘Your father and I have been thinking more about London houses than anything else, so far,’ she said. ‘But now we must really set to work in earnest about a country one. I have heard of two or three already, from friends. Indeed, I had a letter this evening telling me of one. I will read you what Mrs Carew says, if you like.’

The children pressed more closely round her.

‘How lovely this is!’ said Amy. ‘How different everything seems from half-an-hour ago! How could you mean that it was only *partly* good news, mamma? You’re just as fond of the country as we are!’

‘Yes,’ said her mother; ‘but, unfortunately, I cannot be with you all the time. I must stay in London with your father for the first two or three months; though, of course, I shall go down to see you every now and then, so we don’t want to take a house very far away.’

The children's faces fell a little on hearing that their mother would not be with them all the time. But in reality I do not think they felt *very* sad about it; they were too excited by the idea of the change.

Mrs Landor opened one of the letters on her knee, and glanced through it.

'Yes,' she said, 'here is the place: "If by chance you are still thinking of taking a house in the country for several months, I wish you would go down one day to look at my sister's—Woodlake Grange. It is an old house, but in very good repair, quite picturesque-looking—a sort of enlarged cottage with very overhanging eaves, and covered with creepers. It is not a particularly pretty neighbourhood; but the garden is large and a capital one for the children, and the place is very healthy."''

Mrs Landor looked up.

'It does sound nice,' said Amy.

'So far as the house goes, yes,' Kenelm agreed; 'but I should like to be near some-

thing worth going to see, I must say. Even a hill or two to climb would be better than nothing.'

'Isn't there woods,' asked Doff, 'as it's called Woodlake? Fir-woods are nicest.'

'We must find out about that,' answered Mrs Landor. 'I quite agree with you, Doff. Fir-woods are charming.'

She turned over the other letters as she spoke.


'I don't think there is anything else that would interest you,' she said. 'Oh yes, by-the-by, there is one other house worth considering. But it doesn't sound as promising as Woodlake.'





CHAPTER II.

THE GIRL IN THE SQUARE GARDENS.

ELL us about it all the same, please, mamma,' said Amy. 'It is best to hear about them all,' she added, with a very business-like air. So Mrs Lander unfolded another letter.

'The friend who has written to me about this house,' she said, 'does not know it personally, which is less satisfactory. And it hardly sounds large enough for us all. It is a little farther away from London than Woodlake—"in a very pretty part of the country," Miss Leslie writes, "but decidedly lonely. It is a

mile and a half from the village of Huttfield, at which there is a railway station, though not many trains stop at it. And the road from the village is uphill all the way." So it must stand high,' remarked Mrs Landor, 'which is a good thing.'

'And it sounds as if there were hills,' said Kenelm.

"The house," continued his mother, reading aloud again, "is not very attractive outside. It is built of gray stone and looks a little bleak. The garden is not as ornamental as might be desired, as it is rather exposed to the wind and only hardy things flourish there. But there are very pleasant rambles close at hand in the grounds of Greyling Towers, and in a certain part of these grounds the tenant of Greyling Lodge would be allowed to walk with all freedom. Greyling Towers used to be a very fine place. It is now mostly in ruins."

'Is Greyling Lodge the house we should have?' asked Kenelm eagerly.

‘Yes,’ his mother replied.

‘Well, I vote for *it*,’ said the boy, ‘even if it’s not so pretty as Woodlake! Just fancy, Amy—real ruins—what fun we might have!’

‘But,’ said Viva, ‘p’raps we shouldn’t get leave to go into the ruins. It only says that we might go into part of the grounds. No, I think I should like Woodlake better, with a nice garden of our own that we shouldn’t want to go out of.’

‘What a wet blanket you are!’ said Amy. ‘Of course we’d be allowed to climb among the ruins! Papa would get us leave for it, I’m sure.’

‘He would have to examine the ruins in the first place,’ said their mother. ‘I should have no peace of mind if I thought of you clambering up broken staircases, or being precipitated down into unexplored dungeons.’

Her words evidently made the idea of Greyling only the more attractive to the two elder children.

'I do *hope* you and papa will go to see it before you fix on any other house,' said Amy. 'Viva, you are too stupid not to join with Ken and me. You haven't a bit of adventure in you.'

'Well, Viva and I could stay by ourselves in our own garden,' said Dorrie. 'And you and Ken could go adventures, and Doff could sit in a tree reading. That would be all right for everybody; wouldn't it, mamma?'

'Yes, darling,' said Mrs Landor; 'but I really must go! I have several letters to write for your father before he comes in. But I promise to tell you everything that happens about our country plans;' and so saying she left them.

There was no more grumbling from Amy during the rest of that afternoon and evening. The danger to the peace of the nursery, so far as she was concerned, lay now in a different direction, for she was so excited at the prospect before them that she could not stop chattering

about all the wonderful things that might be going to happen. So that her brother and sister at last grew rather tired of it, and begged her to be quiet or to talk of something else.

‘You’ve planned such quantities of impossible things,’ said Kenelm, ‘that there would seem no fun now in anything that *could* happen.’

‘It’s the ruins,’ said Amy, ‘that I can’t help thinking about. Real ruins! I’ve never seen any in my life except in pictures; but there *must* be something wonderful where there are ruins. And then’——

‘What?’ said Viva.

Amy lowered her voice. The nursery-maid had just brought up the tea-tray, and on half-holidays the children had tea all together in the nursery.

‘I’ll tell you in a minute,’ she said. ‘I don’t mind nurse hearing; but Fanny is such a silly girl.’

Kenelm and Viva were not very curious to hear the rest of what she had to tell; but she had no intention of letting the subject drop.

‘What just now came into my head,’ she began again when they were all seated round the table, and Fanny at a safe distance downstairs, ‘was this. Did you notice in the last letter mamma read aloud—the one about Greyling, I mean—that the lady said the tenants—and of course the tenants would mean *us*—would be allowed to walk about in a “certain part” of the grounds of Greyling Towers? Now doesn’t that sound mysterious?’

Viva looked rather impressed, and so in his heart was Kenelm, though he did not feel inclined to say so.

But nurse, who was a very sensible woman, and had known about the probable move to the country for some days, here looked up with a smile.

‘My dear Miss Amy,’ she said, ‘you must not let your fancy run away with you like

that. It's not often there's mysteries and wonderful things of that kind nowadays.'

In her own mind, nurse, who was somewhat old-fashioned, was of opinion that her little people, Miss Amice and Master Adolphus in particular, read too many story-books, and would have been all the better if their library had been a smaller one.

'You can't expect it,' she continued, 'any more than Master Doff could expect to see the fairies dancing round a ring on the lawn if he woke up some fine moonlight night and looked out of the window.'

'I couldn't see them here,' said Doff indignantly, 'cos there isn't any lawn. Fairies don't dance about in the middle of the street.'

'You don't understand me, my dear,' said nurse. 'It was only a way of speaking, so to say. Though all the same I hope there will be a nice lawn wherever we go to in the country. There's nothing pleasanter than a stretch of smooth-cut grass in the summer to

play about on, or sit out on. No wonder they say that fairies like to dance on the grass !'

'That's a very stupid sort of fairies,' said Doff rather surlily. 'I shouldn't care a bit to see them if they were there. I like fairies who do things; goblins and gnomes and enchanters—not silly dancing things like you see in pantomimes.'

'Do be quiet, Doff,' said Viva. 'I want Amy to go on about the mystery.'

Amy was much gratified.

'You can't exactly call it a mystery,' she said modestly. 'It only sounded to me as if there might be something very interesting and perhaps mysterious at Greyling Towers—in the part of the grounds we *shouldn't* be allowed to walk in.'

'Isn't there still a house of some kind there as well as the ruins?' said Kenelm. 'Perhaps there are people living there who don't want strangers coming too close to them.'

'Oh no,' said Amy. 'The letter didn't say anything like that. I'm sure there are only ruins. "Mostly in ruins," it said, and that, of course, wouldn't mean a house to live in.'

'Well, for my part,' said nurse, 'I like the idea of the other house much better, Miss Amy, and so I said to your mamma when she told me about them. A nice large garden with no dangerous places, so that I shouldn't feel uneasy about you—that's what *I* would like.' And though Kenelm and Amy looked at each other with a smile, they did not say anything more.

The next morning broke bright and sunny. Amy's spirits would probably have recovered themselves at the sight of the pleasant weather, even had the delightful news of the day before not come back to her mind the moment she awoke.

'Really,' she thought to herself as she lay glancing at the blue sky to be seen behind



Viva opened her sleepy eyes very unwillingly.

the chimney-pots of the opposite houses, 'how things do change! It doesn't seem the least bit the same world as it did yesterday morning. How I do hope we shall go to Greyling!' But a tap at the door just then warned her that she must not begin indulging in her favourite plans, as nothing vexed her father more than unpunctuality at breakfast.

Up jumped Amy.

'Viva,' she cried—for Viva was still peacefully slumbering—'wake up! Nurse will be coming back in a moment with our hot water. She's just tapped the first time.'

For there was an arrangement that nurse should knock to awake the little girls in the first place without coming in, to 'give us time to wake properly,' as they expressed it.

Viva opened her sleepy eyes very unwillingly.

'Oh Amy!' she said, 'I was just having such a lovely dream about that place with the ruins.'

'How nice!' said Amy, rather enviously.

'You don't *generally* have such interesting dreams as I do. You must tell me about it afterwards.'

For there was a rule of 'no talking allowed during dressing' — a very necessary one, especially for Amy.

They were down in good time for breakfast, and extra good time, for neither their father nor mother was yet in the dining-room.

'Isn't it a nice day, Ken?' said Amy to her brother, whom they found looking out of the window.

'Yes,' the boy replied. 'Though you'd hardly know it in this gloomy room;' which was true. The whole house was more or less sombre and gloomy, for it had belonged to the children's grandparents in old-fashioned days, when people seemed to care less for air and light than they do now. 'I shall be glad to be in a more cheerful place.'

'What are you talking about?' said their father, who just then came into the room.

‘Good morning, my little girls,’ as Amy and Viva came forward to kiss him. ‘Good morning, Ken. What about a more cheerful place?’

He took up several letters which were waiting for him, and began to open them as he spoke. ‘Ah!’ he went on, ‘this is rather quick work, Amice,’ to Mrs Landor as she opened the door. ‘These people want us to go down to see that country house, Woodlake Grange, at once—to-day or to-morrow. I cannot possibly take a day off this week.’

‘Why are they in such a hurry?’ asked Mrs Landor. ‘Is there some one else wanting it?’

‘I have hardly read the letter,’ replied her husband. ‘Oh yes—they have an offer for it unfurnished for a term of years, and unless they agree with us at once they are thinking of accepting it. What is to be done? I can’t have you going all that way alone.’

‘Oh papa,’ said Kenelm, looking up quickly,

'do let me go with mamma! I really can take care of her.'

And so, after some consideration, it was settled; Kenelm and his mother starting off about the middle of the day on their voyage of discovery, leaving Amy and Viva a little envious of their brother's good luck, though much less so than if the journey had been to Greyling Towers instead of to Woodlake Grange.

That afternoon, when the children came in from their walk, it was still so bright and sunny that Amy and Viva begged Miss Sheppard, their daily governess, to let them stay out half-an-hour longer in the square gardens, for which they had a key, though their house was not actually in the square itself, but some little way down a rather gloomy street leading out of it.

Miss Sheppard looked at her watch.

'Half-an-hour would be rather too long,' she said, 'but you may play in the garden for twenty minutes—you can see the time by the



'Let's walk up and down and make plans.'

church clock. I want to correct your exercises before I go'—Miss Sheppard always left just after tea—'so I won't stay out.'

When they found themselves alone, the little girls hesitated for a minute or two as to what they should do.

'It's no good trying to play games,' said Amy; 'only two of us. Let's walk up and down and make plans. Oh Viva! I do so hope mamma won't take that horrid Woodlake Grange.'

'Oh, don't talk any more about houses,' said Viva. 'I'm tired of them. It'll be time enough to make plans when we hear what mamma says.' But, seeing a look of vexation on her sister's face, she tried to change the subject of conversation. 'Look, Amy,' she said quickly, in a lower voice, 'do look at those two ladies who have just come in at the other gate. I've seen the old one before in the gardens, but isn't the young one pretty? Let's walk along that way, so as to see them better.'

Amy, who had a good-sized bump of curiosity, made no objection. The sisters walked slowly past the ladies, who were talking so earnestly that they did not seem to notice them.

‘Isn’t she lovely?’ said Viva. ‘She has a face like a picture, Amy. But doesn’t she look sad?’

‘Yes, awfully,’ Amy agreed. ‘I wish I knew what they were talking about. But of course it wouldn’t be at all polite to listen.’

‘Of course not—it would be very wrong indeed,’ said Viva. ‘But there would be no harm in walking round so as to pass them again. I do so like to see her face.’

The next time they passed the two ladies, the sisters could not help overhearing a word or two that they were saying. It was the elder woman who was speaking.

‘The great thing is if you feel able to carry it out,’ she said. ‘It will need courage and a good deal of nerve.’

‘I am not afraid,’ the girl replied; but the

rest of the sentence did not reach the children's ears.

The face of the last speaker was indeed a sweet and interesting one. She did not look more than eighteen or nineteen, and she was dressed in deep mourning, which showed off her fair complexion and pretty, bright hair.

'I wonder what they are talking about,' repeated Amy, always on the alert for anything in the shape of a mystery. 'Doesn't it sound rather dreadful, Viva—"great courage and nerve to carry it out"?''

'P'raps it's only that she's going to be a nurse in a hospital,' said Viva practically, 'like Miss Sheppard's sister. Miss Sheppard says you do need to be very brave, and I'm sure you must be.'

'Or perhaps,' said Amy eagerly, 'perhaps she's going out to nurse the wounded soldiers, like Miss Nightingale—that would be still worse.'

'It can't be that,' said Viva, 'for there aren't

any battles just now. At least not English battles, I think.'

All this only increased Amy's curiosity.

'I do wish we could just hear a little more,' she said, 'but it would be rude to pass them again on purpose. Let's sit down, Viva, and p'raps we'll just hear a very little as they come towards us again. They are talking quite loud, so it isn't like listening to secrets.'

Viva looked rather doubtful, but still—'I don't mind sitting down,' she said; 'but I won't move my head the least little bit forward to hear what they are saying, and you mustn't either, Amy; so that if we do hear a word or two when they pass us again, it'll only be by chance.'

Amy gave in, as she generally did, to Viva's sturdy judgment, though she could not help glancing backwards and forwards anxiously to see if the ladies were returning once more.

They did so, and this time as they passed the little girls the younger one seemed to notice

them, for a slight smile for a moment lighted up her face. This delighted Amy, who smiled back again. Then in a moment or two came the sound of the young girl's voice in reply to some remark of her companion's.

'Yes,' she said, 'Greyling is very, very isolated. That is the advantage of it. Still, I shall have'—and here came a name which they could not catch—'with me. The village people are frightened of the place, so they will not trouble us.'

Amy's eyes grew round with excitement.

'Viva!' she exclaimed, catching hold of her sister's arm. 'She said *Greyling*—she really did—did you hear?'

'Yes,' said Viva, 'I did. It wasn't your fancy, Amy! It really is very funny!'

'And there is a mystery about it,' went on Amy triumphantly. 'I knew there was. I had a feeling about it when I first heard of the ruins, and about walking in a "certain part" only.'

'I don't believe *that* meant anything,' said

Viva. 'The lady who wrote to mamma would not have said it that kind of way if she had known there was a secret.'

'Well, well,' said Amy impatiently, 'never mind about that part of it! There *is* a mystery; you can't get out of that. You heard with your own ears that she said the village people were frightened of the place. Oh! I do *hope* we shall go there.'

'I don't,' said Viva; 'I just hope awfully that we shan't.'

'What a coward you are!' said Amy. 'You have not a spark of adventure in you. Ken has—lots, even though he's so cool. How I do wish I were a boy! I'd make a much better brother to Ken than sister to you.'

Viva took these remarks very quietly.

'We must go in, Amy,' she said. 'I'm afraid we've stayed too long already.'

Just as they reached their own door a hansom drove up, and out of it jumped Kenelm, followed more leisurely by his mother.

‘How nice and early you’ve got back!’ said Amy. ‘I am so glad. We’ve something’—— but she stopped short, not very sure that the mysterious reference to Greyling which they had overheard would add to its attractiveness in her mother’s eyes. And after all, she said to herself, the first question was, ‘Were they going to Greyling at all?’

‘Oh mamma,’ she went on again as they entered the hall together, ‘don’t say you like Woodlake Grange, and that you think you’ll take it!’

‘I am very sorry, my dear child,’ said her mother, smiling at Amy’s excitement, ‘but I fear I must disappoint you. I do like Woodlake very much indeed, and I am almost sure we shall take it.’





CHAPTER III.

AN AGREEABLE DISAPPOINTMENT.



HERE was nothing for it but for Amy to resign herself to the news which had caused her so much disappointment on the afternoon of her mother's visit to Woodlake Grange.

Not that Amy was very good at resigning herself to anything she did not like. She grumbled a good deal, though mostly in private—that is to say, not within her mother's hearing, for that, she knew, would scarcely have been allowed. But during the next few days the nursery and schoolroom had to bear a great many lamentations that, 'just as there was a

chance of something really nice and interesting happening, it should have come to nothing in the end.'

Even Kenelm, who had begun by sympathising with Amy, grew rather tired of the subject.

'I wish you had never heard of Greyling Towers,' he said impatiently one evening. 'You've got it on the brain. Woodlake isn't bad after all. There are lots of things we can have there that we can't have in London. I dare say it will be jolly enough after all. And very likely if we had gone to Greyling we should not have been allowed to go near the ruins, or something or other would have spoilt the fun of it. That's generally the way if you want a thing very much;' for Kenelm was a bit of a philosopher in his way.

'I dare say something worse than that would have happened,' said Viva. 'We might have broken our legs in climbing, or seen something that really frightened us very much.'

'Oh, don't say that, Viva!' said Amy, her eyes

growing very round. 'It is really too bad of you. I can't bear it.'

Viva looked at her in astonishment.

'Why, Amy,' she exclaimed, 'you needn't call me a coward if you can't bear even thinking of being frightened !'

'Frightened,' repeated Amy, with some contempt. 'Don't you understand I *want* to be frightened? It's the thought of a real chance of adventures and mysteries that's so tantalising.'

'Oh,' said Viva, but the rest of her thoughts she kept to herself, as she knew Amy would laugh at her if she owned how far from sorry she was to keep out of the way of the unknown perils and risks, the idea of which so tempted her sister.

'The only bit of it I cared about,' she thought to herself, 'was what we heard the girl in the garden say. Though, *perhaps*, as mamma thinks, it was only our fancy that she spoke of Greyling.'

They played in the garden two or three times that week, but without seeing again the pretty figure and sweet face of the younger of the two ladies; though one day Amy's quick eyes caught sight of some one going into one of the houses on the other side of the square, who was, she felt sure, the other lady who had been walking with their unknown heroine. But that was all.

'Nothing is sure to happen,' says the old proverb, 'but the unforeseen.'

In the present case nothing could have been more unforeseen than what did happen a week or ten days after Mr and Mrs Landor had satisfactorily settled everything about the taking of Woodlake Grange. The unexpected news came in a letter—not a business one from the house agents—so she opened it without any idea of its contents.

Her face fell as she glanced through it, and she gave a little start of dismay.

'Oh dear!' she exclaimed, 'this is a dis-

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appointment! I really don't know what we must do.'

'What is the matter?' asked the children's father.

'It is this letter from Mrs Carew,' Mrs Landor replied. 'It is about her sister's house—Woodlake Grange. Mrs Forrester, the sister, has asked Mrs Carew to write for her to beg us to give it up if we possibly can. Of course they make it quite a personal matter, as they know they could not legally make us do so. But they are in great trouble, and I scarcely see how, in common humanity, we can stand out;' and she handed the letter to her husband.

His face grew grave as he read it.

'No,' he said. 'I scarcely think we can refuse.'

'What is it, mamma?' asked Amy.

'Mrs Forrester is very ill,' replied Mrs Landor; 'and they say that to move her within the next two months could only be done at great risk. Really, it is very unfortunate—'

for they were just as glad to let the house as we were to get it.'

'Much gladder,' said Amy in a low voice; 'for I wasn't glad at all, and I don't believe Ken was in his heart.' But Mrs Landor was too much concerned to pay any attention to what Amy was announcing.

'It is very awkward for us too,' said Mr Landor, 'as on our side we have promised to let the new owners of this house take possession of it early next month, and it is not very easy to find exactly what we want in the country.'

'Oh papa!' exclaimed Amy, unable to keep quiet any longer, 'don't say that. There is Greyling—Greyling Towers—at least I mean the house there, Greyling Lodge. I'm sure we should like it better than Woodlake.'

Mr Landor looked at her half absently.

'I don't remember about it,' he said, turning to his wife. 'Amy's memory is better than mine. What sort of a place is it? And why did we prefer Woodlake?'

‘We didn’t go to see Greyling,’ said Mrs Landor; ‘it did not seem worth while, when the other was so suitable. The only actual objection I remember to it was its loneliness. It sounded altogether as if it were in a rather wild, desolate part of the country, though picturesque and bracing—the house itself can certainly not be as convenient. And there are ruins in the grounds of what was the big house, close at hand; and, to tell the truth’—with a little smile—‘I think the idea of the ruins frightened me. I had visions of all sorts of appalling accidents happening to the children.’

‘Were the ruins in a part of the grounds that we should be free to make use of?’ asked Mr Landor.

‘That was not very clear. Indeed, we didn’t go into particulars about the place, though I considered it, from the description, the next best to Woodlake. I have kept the letter about it, fortunately,’ answered his wife.

‘Then I’ll tell you what we must do,’ said

Mr Landor as he got up from his seat. 'If you can find me the letter at once, I'll take it with me and wire to ask if the place is still to be had. Whom did you hear of it from? I don't think you told me.'

'It was old Miss Leslie who wrote about it; but she did not know it personally, so I'm afraid the inquiries will be rather roundabout,' replied the children's mother.

'I wonder'—— exclaimed Amy impulsively, but then she stopped short.

'What?' asked her father.

'Oh!' said Amy, growing very red, 'it was only about the lady on the other side of the square'——

Mr Landor looked mystified.

'What do you mean, my dear?' he asked.

Amy and Viva both began to speak at once; but by degrees, and with a little patience, their father disentangled what they had to tell.

'I'm afraid your lively imaginations have been at work,' he said, with a smile. 'It would

be a most curious coincidence if those ladies really had been speaking of Greyling.'

'I am sure it was the children's fancy,' said Mrs Landor, and she said this with a purpose. For if, as now seemed far from impossible, Greyling Lodge should turn out to be their destination for the next few months, she did not wish Amy's head to run away any more on mysteries and secrets, or anything of the kind, in connection with the place.

'I might think I had made a mistake,' said Amy, 'if Viva hadn't heard it too. For you know you always do say, mamma, that she isn't half so fanciful as I am.'

But Mrs Landor was by this time busily writing out the address for her husband, and she took no notice of what Amy said.

Two or three days passed. The children heard no more; indeed, there was no more to hear, except that Miss Leslie had written promising to make immediate inquiries. And Amy was obliged to keep her hopes and fears a good

deal to herself, as the others said if she talked any more about it they would be tired of the place before they had seen it.

But at last came a day of grand excitement.

‘Your father and I are going down to Greyling to-morrow,’ Mrs Landor told them one afternoon. ‘So you will not have to be patient very much longer, Amy.’

‘Oh mamma, how lovely!’ exclaimed the little girl.

‘I hope it *will* be lovely,’ said her mother; ‘for, what with arranging about our new house in London and the upset about Woodlake, I am beginning to feel very anxious indeed to have things settled.’

To-morrow came and went. The children had to go to bed without hearing the result of their father and mother’s journey, for the travellers had not returned by nine o’clock in the evening, Mr Landor having been unable to start early in the day. As to what Amy’s dreams were that night I should not like to

answer. They were probably too wonderful for description.

Their mother was not in the dining-room when they went down to breakfast. She came in a moment or two afterwards; and, to the little girl's delight, there was a smile on her face, which seemed to tell of good news.

'Oh mamma, do say something,' said Amy breathlessly, and clasping her hands in entreaty, 'or I shall never keep still through prayers!'

And even Kenelm, in spite of his philosophy, looked extremely interested.

'Is it all right?' Amy went on.

'If by "all right" you mean that we are going to take Greyling Lodge,' said Mrs Landor, 'well, yes, I think we are almost sure to do so; but you shall hear all about it directly.'

There was no time for more until they were seated at the breakfast-table.

'Now, mamma,' said Amy pleadingly.

Mr Landor looked up at the tone of her voice.



'Now, mamma,' said Amy pleadingly.

‘What are you talking in that beseeching tone for?’ he said.

‘It is about Greyling,’ Mrs Landor answered for her. ‘The child is frantic with anxiety to hear what we think of it.’

‘Don’t raise your expectations too high,’ said Mr Landor; ‘it’s the surest way to be disappointed.’

‘Oh,’ said Amy, ‘you don’t quite understand, papa. We don’t expect it to be a very beautiful place, or very grand, or anything like that. What we mind about—at least Ken and I—is for it to be *interesting*, not just like any house anywhere.’

‘Not commonplace, I suppose you mean,’ said her father. ‘Well, as for Greyling Lodge itself, though not exactly commonplace—it’s too old-fashioned for that—I cannot say that it is picturesque. It is a plain, strongly built, rough gray-stone house, more like the kind of house you see in the north; and the country round about is somewhat bleak—at least, at this

early season it seems so—which heightens the impression of its being a north-country neighbourhood. You certainly could believe yourselves over a hundred miles away from London.'

'Yes,' agreed Mrs Landor, 'you certainly could.'

'Aren't there hills?' said Kenelm.

'Oh yes,' his father replied. 'A branch of the Heatherly Hills begins to rise almost close to the grounds. You can do some climbing, Ken, if you want to.'

'I'm glad of that,' the boy replied; but Amy's mind was off in another direction.

'Which grounds do you mean, papa?' she said; 'the grounds of *our* house or of Greyling Towers?'

'It is the same thing, almost,' answered her father. 'That is to say, there is very little ground belonging to the Lodge. The best of the place is that the tenants are allowed to walk in the grounds of the old house.'

Amy clasped her hands with eagerness under the table.

‘All over them, do you mean, papa; even where the ruins are?’

‘I really don’t know exactly,’ said Mr Landor. ‘No; I think something was said about a part of the grounds being kept private. But you must really wait, Amy, till you all go there, as I suppose you will before long if the offer I have made is accepted.’ For Amy’s cross-questioning was sometimes a little tiresome.

Later in the day she tried to find out more from her mother; but Mrs Landor had not very much to tell. There had not been time for more than a rapid survey of the grounds, but she seemed satisfied that they would be quite to the children’s taste.

‘They have been left to grow wild to a great extent, so that there are capital hiding-places among the trees, and paths that lead to nowhere, and plenty of shady corners.’

‘And the ruins, mamma; could you go close to them?’

‘Not quite,’ Mrs Landor replied. ‘But I

could see they are very picturesque. I should like you and Viva to try to sketch them, Amy.'

'Yes; that would be very nice,' the little girl agreed. 'Are they *quite* ruins, mamma? Is there nobody living there?'

'I cannot say,' answered her mother. 'There may be some habitable rooms on the other side—yes, I think there must be, as some part is railed off. Possibly the owners come down there now and then to picnic, and like to keep it to themselves. I should think there must be a caretaker there; I think I remember seeing smoke rising among the trees.'

All this only whetted Amy's imagination still more. The days seemed to her to pass with leaden wings, till she was at last told that her father's offer had been accepted, and their going to Greyling was finally settled.

Ken was nearly as pleased as his sister, though he said less about it; and Viva took it quietly, though *she* still regretted Woodlake Grange.

Two or three weeks of more or less 'bustle' followed. But children love that sort of thing, not understanding all it means for their elders. Poor Mrs Landor certainly had her hands full just then, having to arrange for a double move, as it were; and, delighted as Amy was, when the morning at last came that saw them off to the country, I scarcely think she was more pleased than her mother.

'It is so nice, mamma, that we are not going to be without you at the first,' said Viva when they were all comfortably settled in the railway carriage, and had waved their last good-byes to their father, who was standing on the station platform to see them off.

Her mother smiled.

'I scarcely think it would have done to leave you to your own devices in a strange place,' she said, 'especially before Miss Sheppard comes.' For it had been arranged that their governess was to join them after a short holiday at her own home. 'I think poor nurse's hair

would have turned gray with anxiety unless she could have kept you always in her sight.'

From his corner Ken gave a little grunt. He did not like any hint that he could possibly still belong to the nursery party, except by special condescension of his own.

'I must satisfy myself first of all,' Mrs Landor went on, 'about those beloved ruins of yours, Amy.'

Amy did not say anything, but her face fell a little. To tell the truth, much as she liked having their mother with them in a casual way, she would not have *very* much minded if they had been allowed to begin their life at Greyling without her, so afraid was the little girl of restrictions being put on the explorings she was so looking forward to.

'Oh mamma,' she exclaimed, 'I wish you'd forget about the ruins! I'm quite sure, with Ken'—this was a judicious piece of flattery—'to look after us, we should not get into any trouble.'

'Ah, well,' said her mother, 'we shall soon be able to judge as to that and everything else connected with our new quarters.'

For the rest of the journey they did not talk very much. They were all, I think, a little tired; for, as young people will do in such case, they had wakened unnecessarily early and run about a great deal more than was needful. Doff, of course, was perfectly quiet in his corner with a book of fairy tales; and little Dorrie fell comfortably asleep with her head on nurse's shoulder.

It was not a long journey. They had left London early in the afternoon, and they reached Fornby Station soon after four o'clock. Fornby was on the main line from London; the little station of Huttfield was much nearer Greyling; but only a few trains stopped there, so it had been thought better this time, in consideration of the large party and the luggage, to get out at Fornby, where a commodious wagonette and a cart were awaiting them.

‘How far have we to go?’ asked Amy as soon as she was seated in the carriage.

‘I don’t quite know,’ her mother replied. ‘When your father and I came out the other day we went on to Huttfield, as there was a train that suited. I fancy it is a drive of six or seven miles from here. You had better ask Ken — the driver will tell him.’ For Kenelm had, of course, chosen the vacant seat on the box.

‘Seven miles,’ he replied, in answer to Amy’s inquiries, ‘and the last bit of it uphill.’

Amy sighed.

‘I feel as if we should never get there,’ she said; ‘it seems like one of those things — I forget what you call them — in the desert, that always go away farther when you think you are close to them.’

‘You mean a mirage, I suppose,’ said her mother. ‘No, I don’t think there’s any fear of Greyling Lodge turning out a mirage.’

‘I like a long drive,’ said Viva, who generally

took a cheerfully matter-of-fact view of things, 'specially in an open carriage, so that you can see where you're going, and have a good idea of the place before you get there. But won't it make it rather difficult for papa when he comes out, and even for you, mamma, if you have often to go to London?'

'I am afraid London will have to be my headquarters after this first week or two,' said Mrs Landor. 'That is to say, till July or August. I should not like to leave your father so long alone, and I shall have a good deal to do about the new house.'

Viva looked rather disappointed.

'Why, Viva, you knew that before,' said Amy. 'Don't you remember hearing that papa and mamma are going to stay with grandpapa now we're all away?'

'I don't mind,' said little Dorrie, nestling up closer to her mother, ''cos I mean to go to London with mamma every time, and only come back when she does.'

‘You can’t’—— Amy was beginning, but her mother stopped her by a look. There was no use in saying anything to make the little girl unhappy before the time.

‘The best plan of all,’ Mrs Landor said lightly, ‘would be to get an enchanted carpet such as Doff knows all about; but I am afraid that is impossible. So we shall have to look out for trains that stop at Huttfield as often as we can manage it.’





CHAPTER IV.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

FOR the first three or four miles there was nothing out of the common in the look of the country they were passing through. It was just pretty ordinary English landscape. But after a little time, when they had turned aside from the main road—originally one of the old coaching roads—a slight rise in the ground began to be noticeable, and by the time they had left Fornby Station five miles behind them the aspect of things changed very much.

‘We must be getting near the turn to Huttfield,’ said Mrs Landor, ‘and then I shall know where I am. There is already something of the north-country feeling and look about here.’

‘And it seems cooler,’ said Amy. ‘That shows we’re getting higher; doesn’t it, mamma?’

‘Partly so, perhaps,’ said her mother; ‘but partly, too, I think, that the sun has gone in. I do hope it will not rain.’

Kenelm, who heard his mother’s remark, made some inquiry of the driver, and turned round reassuringly.

‘It’s not going to rain,’ he said. ‘The driver knows the look of the country. He says it always is rather gray about here.’

‘Then I suppose we must be getting near Greyling,’ said Amy, gazing round her eagerly. ‘But, oh, Ken!’ she suddenly exclaimed, ‘do ask him what that castle is—high up there among the trees. Did you know there was a castle anywhere near, mamma?’ she went on eagerly.



‘That is Greyling itself—Greyling Towers.’

Mrs Landor had to turn round, as she was sitting opposite Amy.

‘Why,’ she said, ‘that is Greyling itself—Greyling Towers, I mean. I had no idea it looked so imposing in the distance. These are your famous ruins, Amy.’

Amy grew breathless with delight.

‘Oh, how splendid!’ she cried. ‘Papa needn’t have told us not to expect too much. I had no idea it could be anything like that. It’ll be like living in feudal times!’

‘Or like the White Cat’s Castle,’ said Viva, becoming, for her, quite excited too.

‘No,’ said Doff rather grumpily, ‘the White Cat’s Castle wasn’t a bit like that. It was a shiny, marbly place, *quite* different.’

But, all the same, the little boy’s eyes, like those of the rest of the party, were fixed with the greatest interest on the crag-like walls of the gray towers, whose base was completely hidden by the thickly-growing trees with which the rising ground, where stood the ruins, was

covered. As Mrs Landor had said, this first view of the old place was distinctly imposing.

After a minute or two they lost sight of it again, for the road was a winding one, growing steeper and steeper as they went on—the last half-mile or so being ascended at a foot-pace.

‘It does seem to be getting beautifully lonely,’ said Amy, with satisfaction, just before they suddenly turned into a short drive, where the level ground made the horses cheer up and trot on again more briskly.

‘Here we are at last,’ said Mrs Landor as they pulled up before a low stone porch, Kenelm springing down, almost before the wagonette had stopped, to help his mother and sisters out.

Commonplace or not, the first impression made by Greyling Lodge on the travellers was decidedly cheering and comfortable. The small, square stone hall, though somewhat bare and grim-looking, was lighted up by a brightly-burning fire, and some of their own servants,

who had come a day or two before to get things ready, were there with smiling faces to receive them.

‘Have you got on comfortably?’ said Mrs Landor. ‘You found everything all right, I hope?’

‘Yes, ma’am, thank you,’ the housemaid answered. ‘We’ve had a good deal to do, though. Everything was left quite clean and tidy, I must say; but it does seem a long way from London, especially after dark. I think there must be owls in the ruins.’

‘Why do you think so?’ said Amy. ‘I do hope there are,’ she went on, not waiting for an answer. ‘Oh mamma, mayn’t we run about and look at all the rooms while they’re taking the luggage down?’

‘Tea is quite ready, Miss Amy,’ said Jane, ‘in the dining-room.’

‘We must take our things off first,’ said Amy, darting out of the hall as she spoke, on the principle of silence giving consent, for

her mother had turned away without replying, to speak to the cook.

The little girl was quickly followed by Kenelm and Viva, and in another moment their footsteps were to be heard pattering up the stone staircase and running along the passages overhead.

The voyage of discovery did not take very long, for the plan of the house was exceedingly simple. Downstairs, at opposite sides of the hall, were fair-sized dining and drawing rooms, with a smaller room opening out of the former, surrounded by empty bookshelves, which showed it had been used as a library, and which in her own mind Mrs Landor had decided upon as a schoolroom. There was another door in this room; but at present we had perhaps better follow the children upstairs.

The first floor gave an impression of much greater space than the ground floor, for there was no basement except cellars, and the kitchens and other offices covered a good area. Over

these were several bedrooms of varying sizes, all intended for the family's use, as another staircase led directly up from the rear of the house to the servants' quarters on the second floor.

As Mrs Landor came into the dining-room, where a tempting tea was spread out, the three children reappeared from the upper stories, still with hats and jackets on.

'Oh mamma!' exclaimed Amy, 'we have been all through the rooms, and I do hope you'll let them be settled the way we want them. Do let Viva and me have one that looks out towards the Towers.'

'I don't care about that side of the house,' said Viva. 'I don't want to be kept awake hearing the owls screeching; and Jane says they do make such a noise at night.'

'It wouldn't make much difference which side of the house you were at, as far as hearing them is concerned,' said Kenelm. 'They come out at night, don't you know, Viva, and fly all over the place.'

‘Well,’ said Viva, ‘I’d rather not be on the Tower side, besides about the owls.’

‘Then I think you’d better sleep in the nursery with Doff and Dorrie,’ said Amy.

But Mrs Landor, anxious to prevent any approach to a quarrel on their first arrival, interposed before Viva had time to reply.

‘I settled about the rooms when I was here before,’ she said quietly. ‘But in the meantime we had better be thinking of tea. The room over this is the day-nursery. Jane knows it. She will take you upstairs again, and you can leave your things there in the meantime; and do be quick, or these nice, hot cakes will be quite cold.’

Five minutes later they were all seated round the table; and even Amy, in spite of her excitement, found herself so hungry when she began to eat that for some little time there was not much conversation beyond ‘Pass me the butter, please;’ ‘May I have some more tea, mamma?’ and so on, till Kenelm declared his arm

was quite aching from cutting slices of cold ham.

When at last the request for 'a little more' came to an end, Mrs Landor glanced out of the window.

'It is still quite light,' she said; 'barely half-past six. Would you not like a run outside to see the garden, while nurse and I settle things a little? Ken, you will look after your sisters; and for to-night at least, Amy, you must be content to stay within bounds. Promise me not to go near the ruins.'

Amy, of course, had no choice but to promise, though she did so reluctantly.

'We needn't take Dorrie; need we, mamma?'

she said. 'She walks so slowly, and perhaps she'd catch cold.'

'I don't want to go, thank you, Amy,' said Dorrie in her clear, high-pitched little voice. 'I want to stay with mamma and unpack my dolls.'

'I don't think I want to go out very much

either,' said Viva; but this neither Kenelm nor Amy would consent to, so it ended in the four children setting off together, for Doff in his secret heart was almost as eager as his eldest sister to see something, though but in the distance, of the ruined Towers.

'For even if they're not a bit like the White Cat's Castle,' he said to himself, with great contempt for Viva's mistaken idea, 'they would do very well for an ogre's fortress; perhaps there is an ogre's wife still living there, though I won't say so for fear of frightening the girls.'

The sun had already disappeared as they came out of the house, and a red glow beginning to show in the west told that its 'good-night' was not now very far off. The porch of Greyling Lodge faced southwards, the ruins were on the right, so a few yards down the drive brought the children within view of the grim old walls. Just now, however, their gloom was broken by the reflections from the

sky on some still glazed windows low down in the building. Amy stood still and gazed at it breathlessly. 'Ken,' she said in a half-awe-struck voice, 'you see it isn't all ruins! You see there are proper windows still.'

'Nobody ever said it was all ruins,' said Kenelm. 'Mamma said she dared say there was a caretaker there, for she thought she'd seen smoke.'

'If we could but see it close to,' said Amy.

From where they stood the Towers were at about two hundred yards' distance, though it scarcely appeared as much, the intervening ground being broken and irregular, and much hidden from view by the coppice wood, which extended from the ruins to where the Lodge garden began. Garden, indeed, it could scarcely be called, not so much from neglect, for it was fairly neat and not untended, but anything like ornamental beds or borders was unattempted. And even the grass was more like the short

thymy turf of a Scotch hillside than the lawn of an English country house.

‘I don’t know about “close to,”’ Kenelm replied. ‘We must wait till mamma settles how far we’re to go. But we certainly may go a good deal nearer than we are. Why, we’ve only just come out of our house.’

‘Well, I think the first thing to do,’ said Viva, ‘is to go all over our own garden. I wish there weren’t any ruins or anything but just this place.’

It was on Amy’s lips again to reproach her sister with her want of enterprise, not caring for adventures, and so on. But though so impetuous, she was a fair-minded little girl when she gave herself time to think, and now she remembered that Viva had been kind and good-natured in coming out at all, when she had really not wanted to do so. So she turned to Kenelm and said brightly :

‘I think Viva is right. Let us first make a tour of inspection, as papa calls it, close to

home, and then perhaps we might go a tiny bit nearer the ruins.'

'I expect we shall do that any way,' said Kenelm, 'even without leaving the Lodge grounds. But come along; don't let's lose any more time. I wonder if there are no animals about the place—dogs any way; I don't suppose there are any horses.'

'There may be cows,' said Viva, who had the soul of a farmer's wife, 'and surely cocks and hens.'

'And owls and bats,' added Amy mischievously. 'Owls for certain!'

'Not here!' exclaimed Viva in a startled voice. 'Not in our house!'

'We're not talking about the house,' said Kenelm. 'Cows and cocks and hens wouldn't be in the house. Do come along; I see some buildings at the back that look like stables and barns.'

They raced round, enjoying the fresh feeling of the keen air and the sense of novelty, always

so delightful to children, and to many grown-up people too, I fancy. There was really not much to see in the so-called garden, though there was plenty of space for running about and games of any kind, and here and there a pleasant, shady corner, if ever shade should be needed. At present, however, it was difficult to think of Greyling Lodge as ever hot or sunny; it would have seemed quite out of character.

The old buildings to the rear of the house turned out rather interesting, though most of them were empty and more or less dilapidated. But in one loose box, to their great joy, they discovered a donkey—a nice, sprightly-looking donkey, too, evidently intended to draw the neat little governess-cart which was their next find in a coach-house close by.

This was most satisfactory, and scarcely less so was the appearance of a dear old collie, who made his way up to them with every sign of doggy welcome in his kindly eyes and wagging tail.

‘Isn’t he a dear?’ said Viva. ‘We can take him walks with us, and then in case we lose our way he’d bring us safe home! I wonder what his name is.’

‘P’raps Jane knows,’ said Amy; ‘he must have been left behind on purpose as a watch-dog, I suppose.’

‘There must be some kind of man about the place,’ said Kenelm—‘a gardener, I should think. Over there it looks like a kitchen-garden.’

He was right. Beyond the wall of the stable-yard was a fair-sized fruit and vegetable garden, and in another minute or two they caught sight of an old man putting up his gardening tools before leaving for the night.

‘Good evening,’ said Kenelm civilly as they came near him.

‘Good evening, sir,’ was the reply, ‘and young ladies the same.’

The voice was a pleasant one, though thin and quavery from age; and pleasant too was

the wizened old face, with its somewhat dreamy, pale-blue eyes. He seemed to suit the place; he had the look of being used to spend many hours alone and in silence.

‘Is this your dog?’ asked Amy. ‘Do you take him away with you?’

The old man shook his head.

‘The gentleman said,’ he replied, ‘as how he’d rather I left him here. There’s a good kennel in the yard, and he don’t mind. He knows I’m not far off.’

‘Where do you live, then?’ Amy went on. Amy seldom lost information through not asking for it.

The gardener nodded his head in the direction of the Towers, without speaking.

‘Missis and I look after the old place,’ he said, after a moment’s silence.

‘Oh, how nice!’ exclaimed the little girl. ‘Then you can tell us all about the ruins?’

He looked at her with a sudden keenness in his face.



‘Oh, how nice ! . . . Then you can tell us all about the ruins.’

‘There’s nought to tell, missie,’ he said, with a half-smile. ‘It’s just an old house, as you see it.’

‘We want to see it; that’s just it,’ said Amy. ‘Ruins *must* be interesting! Don’t you think you can show us them some day?’

‘Ruins is dangerous footing,’ replied the old man, ‘and no visitors is allowed now, not since the Towers was shut off from picnic parties and such-like.’

Amy’s face fell. . She was beginning some remonstrance or further inquiry, when Kenelm interrupted her.

‘You’ve plenty of vegetables, I suppose?’ he said, with a business-like air. ‘This garden looks well stocked.’

‘Not so bad considering the poor soil hereabouts,’ said the gardener; ‘and the south wall does well for fruit.’

He turned towards it as he spoke, pointing out the trained trees to the children following him. When they came to the corner he con-

tinued his way, leading back again as it were, till they were close to the house. Here the long wall, which had been sloping inwards, suddenly ran straight again till it joined that of the west side of Greyling Lodge.

‘How funnily-shaped the garden is,’ said Kenelm. ‘Do our grounds stop here? At the front of the house they seemed to go a good way to the right.’

‘No, sir,’ answered the old man. ‘At this side of the house you are at the edge of the Towers grounds. You don’t see the wall from the front, for it’s lower, and the bushes hide it.’

Kenelm stood still and considered.

‘Then the windows at this side of the house look straight down into the Towers grounds?’ he said.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the old man; ‘but there’s not many of the rooms as has windows on this side, and not much to see if they had. The best view of the old place is farther back,

behind the kitchen-garden, and that's the part of the grounds that you're free to walk in. It's getting late now; but I'll show you to-morrow how far it is open to the Lodge tenants; it's really not much that is shut off.'

'But'—— began Amy in an objecting tone. Kenelm stopped her, however, by a look.





CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS DOOR.



HE next day dawned brightly. It was no longer impossible, not indeed necessary, to picture Greyling in the sunshine, for there the sunshine was in reality.

And the children's spirits, which even dull weather, thanks to the novelty and interest of all about them, would scarcely have been able to depress, rose higher and higher. Even Viva, who of them all had been the least 'taken' with the look of things the night before, allowed that it was very nice and cheerful, and bore with

good temper Kenelm's teasing about the bats and owls who would be sure to find their way down the chimney of her bedroom sooner or later.

'I don't believe there are any at all,' said Viva, 'whatever Jane says. It must have been her fancy. We didn't hear the *least* noise in the night; did we, Amy?'

'N—no,' said Amy, rather sorry to have to own to it. 'But then, Viva,' she went on, taking for once the practical side of things, 'you know we were both fast asleep; though I suppose if the owls had made a great noise we might have heard them. Any way, I'm very glad our room is at the nice side, though we don't see the Towers any better than from the front. But it's *interesting* to know that we look on to the private grounds.—Oh Ken!' she continued, turning suddenly to her brother, 'why did you stop me when I was going to say something to the old gardener last night?'

'I thought you were going to grumble at

not being allowed to go all over the grounds and close up to the ruins,' he answered; 'and it would have looked rather surly, when he'd been so good-natured—and *prying*, too.'

'I wasn't going to grumble,' said Amy; 'I was only going to say that we didn't care so much for a good *view* of the ruins as really to *see* them—all over them, I mean.'

'Well, that's about what I expected you were going to say,' answered Kenelm.

'Do try to get the ruins a little out of your head, Amy,' said her mother, for this conversation had gone on at the breakfast-table. 'Some day, I dare say, perhaps when your father is here, we shall get leave to go over them. But if you keep thinking about them so much they will become a sort of Bluebeard's chamber to you, and spoil your enjoyment of what is open to you.'

'Oh mamma,' exclaimed Viva, 'I wish you hadn't said that about Bluebeard! It's rather frightening! Please make Amy promise that

she won't tease me about it. You don't really think there can be a locked-up room there ?'

'My dear child, how matter-of-fact you are !' said her mother, laughing. 'No, of course Amy mustn't tease you. Now, supposing for the next hour or so you help nurse and me to get your things in order. There are all the books to carry down to the schoolroom, and lots of other things that a few pairs of willing feet and hands can be of great use about. And you, Ken, will like to arrange your own things, I dare say. If we all work together I should think we should have time for an expedition in the donkey-cart to the village—Huttfeld—before luncheon. I shall have several things to order at the shops there, and it would be nice to see something more of the country.'

This plan was welcomed by all, and for the next half-hour or so the children were busily employed in carrying their various belongings, as they were unpacked, to their proper destinations.

'We needn't bother about our clothes, need

we, nurse ?' said Amy. 'And if Emma puts the little things for our bedroom together, we'll arrange them afterwards. It's the schoolroom I want to get settled first, so that we can feel at home there.'

'Yes,' Viva agreed ; 'nothing looks so messy as books lying about in heaps. Amy,' she went on when they had accomplished another journey down to the little room in question, 'don't you think we might put the ugliest books and slates and things of that kind in that cupboard in the wall, and arrange the nicest-looking on those open shelves ?'

'What cupboard do you mean ?' asked Amy, glancing round.

'That one over there, of course,' answered her sister, putting down her pile of books on the table as she spoke, and going towards the door she pointed to. 'I can't open it,' she continued after vainly turning the handle backwards and forwards two or three times.

Amy crossed over to see what she could do.

‘It’s locked,’ she said; ‘so, whether it’s a cupboard or not, it’s no use to us unless we can get the key. I’ll run and ask mamma if she knows anything about it.’ And so she did, returning in a minute or two. ‘No,’ she said. ‘There’s no key that can possibly belong to it, mamma says. So we must just make our things look as well as we can on the shelves.’

But while they were busily employed in doing this, Amy’s eyes strayed several times towards the door in the wall. She was still on the scent of mysteries.

‘P’raps,’ she began again, ‘the old gardener knows where the key is. Don’t let’s forget to ask him, Viva. You see, it’s on the side of the house towards the Towers, so if it isn’t a cupboard it must open right upon the grounds we mayn’t walk in. You remember the house-wall is the same as the garden-wall at this side.’

‘Let’s look through the keyhole,’ said Viva. ‘If it opens on to out-of-doors we should see light through.’

Both little sisters stooped down in turn till their eyes were on a level with the keyhole ; but there was nothing to be seen.

‘It’s quite dark,’ said Amy, ‘so it must be a cupboard, as you thought, Viva.’

Viva did not at once answer ; she was still peering through the keyhole.

‘Quick,’ said Amy impatiently. ‘Why don’t you speak ?’

Viva got up slowly from her knees.

‘I can’t quite make it out,’ she said. ‘It is quite dark, and yet there’s a draught coming through. Didn’t you feel it on your eye, Amy ? Why, it’s even coming on my fingers when I hold them in front of the keyhole.’

‘Well, p’raps it isn’t a cupboard after all,’ said Amy thoughtlessly. ‘It may be a door to the outside !’

‘But *then* it wouldn’t be dark,’ Viva reminded her. ‘Unless the key was in the lock on the other side, and then there’d be no air, would there ?’



She was still peering through the keyhole.

They stood and looked at each other. It did seem a curious dilemma, and they were still puzzling over it when their mother's voice calling them to be quick, as she was just going to get ready to go out, made them hurry to finish their arrangements for the time being.

Kenelm had been beforehand outside. He had already hurried up the old gardener to some purpose; for the donkey was harnessed to the little carriage and waiting for them at the front-door.

Mrs Landor and the two girls got in, Kenelm starting off on foot in front of them, declaring as he did so that he had not much fear of their overtaking him. But the donkey proved willing as well as sturdy, and as the first part of their journey was on fairly level ground they got on pretty quickly. Then, however, came a steep bit of road downhill. Amy jumped out and walked beside her brother at the donkey's head.

'That's the best of a cart like this,' she

remarked; 'we can get out and in so easily, and take turns.'

'Stop a moment when we get to the next corner,' said her mother. 'It will give the donkey a little rest and us time to admire the view.'

It was certainly well worth admiring, for, rugged and bare as was its general character, the lights and shades on the not far distant hills made a great variety, and the dark trees surrounding their own house and the old Towers were brightened up here and there by the clear spring sunshine. On such a day as this Greyling, if not perhaps as impressive as under gloomier skies, without doubt looked most attractive; and the air was really delicious, bracing and refreshing, with a scent of thyme and heather about it, and yet not too keen.

They all looked about them for a few moments without speaking. Then Viva said, with a little sigh of satisfaction:

‘It really is a very nice place, I do think; don’t you, mamma? I’m beginning not to wish we had gone to that other house after all.’

For, in the bright morning look of things, all the gloom and ‘mystery,’ which had been the fascination of Greyling for Amy, and Viva’s secret dread, had, for the time at least, quite disappeared. But as they drove on again towards the village, Amy’s head was still frequently turned in the direction of the ruins, and, all the time that Viva was thoroughly enjoying herself in the quaint village shops where her mother was giving orders, the elder sister’s fancy was running on the possibility of somehow or other taking the fortress by storm—that is to say, of making her way by hook or by crook into the recesses of the ancient building.

‘I believe,’ she said to herself, ‘that that door has something to do with it, though how I am sure I can’t think. The gardener

was rather funny about that side of our house. I wish mamma would be quick; I want to go back and poke about, and if Viva won't join I shall try to get Ken.'

The return home was a slower affair than their drive to the village, as there was so much uphill road; and after a time Amy grew so impatient that she was glad when her mother decided that it was hard upon the donkey to have three in the carriage.

'I don't think I can walk home uphill myself,' she said. 'I am so tired to-day, but'——

'Let me get out,' interrupted Viva, springing up as she spoke.

'Both of us can walk,' exclaimed Amy. 'I'm not the very least tired, and I don't get out of breath as you do sometimes, Viva.'

So Mrs Landor remained alone in the little cart, allowing the reins to hang loosely on the donkey's neck, while the children

walked beside her. But after a little Kenelm and Amy got some way in advance, and their mother called out to them not to wait for her and Viva if they preferred to hasten on.

This just suited Amy.

‘Do let us hurry on, Ken,’ she said; ‘as soon as we get past the worst bit of hill I’ll tell you why. I can’t talk much just where it’s so steep;’ and having thus whetted her brother’s curiosity, she found him all the more ready to listen to her account of the locked door, about which she had really come to persuade herself there was some mystery.

If one is *always* on the lookout for some special thing, the chances are that sooner or later one will meet with it. Thus with Amy; her determination to unearth a mystery had at last, strange as it may seem, led her in a right direction. And a very few minutes after they had reached home Kenelm himself,

though he had been inclined to laugh at her, was really struck by what they found.

‘I’ll tell you what we’ll do,’ said Amy. ‘There are one or two windows on the side of our house that is next the Towers grounds. One of them, you know, is our bedroom. Before we examine the garden, Ken, let’s have a good look out of that window. Perhaps by leaning over we can see the door below.’

Upstairs they hurried, and, greatly to Amy’s satisfaction, neither nurse nor Emma was in the way. She tried to push up the window, but found it too stiff, though the one to the front had been left wide open.

‘I don’t believe,’ she said, panting with her effort, ‘that this window—has been opened—for years!’

But Kenelm, coming forward and joining his strength to hers, succeeded better. They pushed up the lower sash sufficiently to get their heads through and peer about.



**‘Get out of the way for a minute, Amy,’ said Kenelm. ‘I can
lean out farther if you’re not there.’**

Then came an explanation from Amy. The door was not visible, but just where it was easy to calculate that it must be stood a curious projection from the wall, almost in the shape of what might be called a 'lean-to,' though not quickly perceptible to any one not on the look-out for it, as it was thickly overgrown with ivy and surrounded by a tangle of shrubs.

Kenelm did not at first understand Amy's excitement at this discovery.

'Don't you see,' she said, 'that that's where the locked door opens into? Either it's a very queerly-shaped kind of cupboard sticking out of the house for no reason, or it's a'—— She stopped short, herself at a loss for any other explanation of this buttress-like appendage to the otherwise straight, flat wall of this side of Greyling Lodge.

'Get out of the way for a minute, Amy,' said Kenelm. 'I can lean out farther if you're not there.'

Amy fell back, though rather reluctantly.

Her faith in her own powers of observation was not small. But in a minute her respect for her brother's increased.

'I'll tell you what I believe it is,' he said as he drew in his head. 'It looks to me as if that door opened on to steps that go down into some sort of cellar or underground passage perhaps. That's the only way I can explain the slanting shape of that kind of lean-to. It must have been added after the house was built.'

'Oh Ken!' cried Amy, in high delight. 'How lovely! It is a real mystery! Perhaps it's been there for hundreds of years. There may be secret chambers and all sorts of wonderful things.'

'It doesn't seem very secret,' said Kenelm disappointingly; 'for nobody could look at the house much without seeing it, sticking out like that. Still, I'll allow that it's queer, and what makes it more so is that the old gardener said nothing about it. If it is an underground passage it must lead to the Towers.'

‘Of course,’ said Amy, ‘that’s the whole point of it. There’s nothing interesting in this stupid old house by itself that I can see.’

‘And,’ said her brother, ‘I can’t think why people living at the Towers should have wanted a private way to and from this house. But after all, remember, Amy, the steps, if there are steps, may only go down into a well or wine-cellar.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Amy; ‘there must be more in it than that. But do let’s go and poke about a little from the outside, Ken;’ and she turned to leave the room, her brother following her.

‘We aren’t likely to find out much from the outside,’ he said. ‘Still, I’d like to see more of the whole place, and I’d like to tackle that old gardener again.’

There was little more of interest in their own part of the grounds. But by dint of perseverance Amy discovered a particularly rugged bit of masonry in the wall dividing their territory

from that of the Towers. And with a little help from her brother she managed to clamber up to the top, Ken easily following her.

‘Now,’ said Amy with satisfaction, ‘let’s take a good look round, Ken. We’re not very high up, certainly, but we can see as much on the Tower side as on our own. What I want to know is what part of the Tower grounds we may walk in; for, to begin with, I don’t see how we’re to get there at all except over this wall.’

‘We can ask the old man,’ said Ken; ‘he can’t mind telling us that, for it was promised at the very beginning that we should have the run of some of the place.’

Just as he was saying this they heard the sound of slowly approaching heavy footsteps.

‘I believe it’s old Giles,’ said Kenelm, for such was the gardener’s name. But rather to their surprise, as the footsteps drew nearer, they saw the old man’s figure emerging from a tangle of shrubs and brushwood on the

Towers side of the wall instead of on their own.

‘Good morning,’ Kenelm called out.

Giles looked before him for a moment or two, as if uncertain what he had heard.

‘Good morning,’ repeated Kenelm more loudly, and then the gardener caught sight of him, and, without replying to the greeting, slowly made his way towards them.

‘How grumpy he looks!’ said Amy in a low voice; and there certainly was an expression of annoyance on the old man’s face.

‘Whatever have you got up there for, sir?’ he said, peering at the children through the branches.

‘To look about us, of course,’ the boy replied. ‘Not that there’s much to be seen. Are you coming round into our garden? We’ll come down and meet you; we’ve a lot of things to ask you.’

‘Can’t we jump down on your side,’ said Amy, ‘and come round with you?’

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‘No, miss, you can’t,’ replied old Giles rather abruptly. ‘This here’s the private part of the grounds.’

‘It’s all private, it seems to me, on your side of the wall,’ said Amy discontentedly. ‘We want to know where we may go. We were promised leave to walk about in some of the Tower shrubberies.’

‘I’m not saying you weren’t, miss,’ Giles replied, ‘but it wasn’t here. I’ll meet you in the kitchen-garden if you go round there. But you’d best get off the wall.’

Then he walked on, evidently intending to say no more, so that following his advice seemed the best thing to do.

‘Grumpy old bear!’ said Amy as her brother helped her down.

Kenelm smiled.

‘What are you laughing at?’ said Amy.

‘I was only thinking to myself,’ said her brother, ‘that you are rather contradictory—no, I don’t mean contradictory exactly—what’s

the word?—inconsistent. If there is a mystery—and I'm sure you want one—it's quite of a piece for old Giles to be grumpy and try to keep us out of the place.'

'Yes,' said Amy, 'of course it is. How clever you are, Ken! It's getting more and more like a story, isn't it?' and her spirits rose still higher, as she hurried her brother on to the kitchen-garden.



in a tangle except the private bit near the house. You'll find it the nicest a little farther off, out of the wood like, where it's more open. There's a bit of a brook, too, at the edge of the fields over there,' and he pointed to his right, 'where they do say there's fish to be caught sometimes. I dare say you'd like to have a try at them.'

'Humph!' said Kenelm dryly, on his guard against this amiable condescension. 'Yes, perhaps we might some day. But what we want just now is to know exactly how near we may go to the ruins without trespassing. Once we understand that we won't bother you any more.'

Giles's amiability was evidently but skin-deep. Finding his bait had not taken, he turned rather surlily to the left, without reply, followed, needless to say, along the narrow paths by the two children, Amy's eyes dancing with excitement.

'He does want to keep us as much away from the ruins as he can,' she whispered to

her brother. 'The queerer he is the better pleased I am now. Isn't it getting lovely, Ken?'

A little way farther on they emerged rather suddenly on to a wider and fairly well-kept gravel path, almost wide enough to be called a drive, though the shrubbery on each side was much neglected and overgrown. After some few turnings and windings this path grew straighter, till at last, almost directly in front of them, they saw a heavy wooden gate, flanked by strong palings of some height. Beyond these rose the now familiar Towers, though the intermediate ground on the other side of the palings was naturally hidden from view.

A few yards on this side of the gate Giles pulled up.

'There now,' he said, turning round and speaking for the first time since Kenelm's snub about the brook—'There now, if that bain't as plain as a pikestaff, I dunno what you'd have. There can't be no mistake about how

far you should go and no farther with that there gate and paling a - staring you in the face.'

'My good man,' said Kenelm, 'who spoke of making mistakes except you yourself, when you said you'd rather show my mother instead of us? We're not a couple of babies. Of course, it's all perfectly clear; that's to say, if'—— but here he checked himself. 'You are not afraid of us flying over the paling, I suppose?' he went on lightly.

The gardener grunted, and turned to retrace his steps.

'The kitchen-garden door is not kept locked, is it?' said Kenelm.

'It's not likely,' answered Giles. 'I'd have enough to do, locking and unlocking, seeing how many times in the day I come through.'

'And do you go in at this big gate here every time you go home to your own cottage?' said Amy inquisitively, 'or,' she went on with an innocent air, 'I should say to the Towers; for

you live in the rooms that are still fit to be used, don't you ?'

Giles looked at her with a curious sort of pride.

'Through them there gates,' he said. 'Bless you ! they've not been unlocked since *I've* been here, and that's a matter of forty year and more. Man and boy I've been about Greyling gettin' on for half-a-century. No, indeed, them gates hasn't been opened since the old squire, as they called him, druv hisself out of them for the last time. He knew it was for the last time, so the story goes, for he looks back and takes off his hat and says summat as no one rightly heard, though they do say it meant that they'd never open again to one of his name.'

Amy was listening with intensest interest.

'Ken, Ken,' she exclaimed, catching hold of her brother, who had strolled away a little, 'did you ever hear anything so like a story-book ?' and she hastily repeated the gardener's words. 'Oh, do tell us more !' she went on

beseechingly. 'Why did he go away, and why did he never come back? And how long has the house been in ruins?'

Giles was flattered by her eagerness, and for the time his rather surly, reserved manner had disappeared.

'That I can't tell you rightly, missie,' he said. 'Tis a long time ago, and I'm not a book-larned man. You'd find it in your history books. 'Twas in the war times, and the squire got into some trouble, and never came back to his own place. And he'd spent a deal before then. He was a free-handed gentleman; so most of the property was sold, bit by bit, till there was just the Towers and the land close round about left for his daughter and her family. 'Twas some of them, I take it, as turned the Lodge into a gentleman's house, and lived there instead of in the big house, which was partly ruined by fire, and would a' cost too much to build up again. And that's about all I can tell you.'



‘And whom does Greyling belong to now?’ she asked eagerly.

He was showing signs of 'shutting up' again, and Amy hurried out with another question, feeling that she must make hay while the sun of Giles's communicativeness still shone at all.

'And whom does Greyling belong to now?' she asked eagerly. 'Is that old squire's daughter still living?'

It was a silly question, considering what Giles had just related; though, ten to one, but for his irritation at her thoughtlessness he would not have condescended to answer at all.

'Folks don't live centuries long nowadays; not since the Bible times, as you might know, missie,' he said pompously.

'Oh no, of course not. How silly of me to ask that!' said Amy, with unusual meekness. 'No; it must be that lady's grandchildren, or even great-grandchildren, who are the owners now. *What* is their name? and why don't they open the gates?'

'That, as I take it, bain't neither my place to say, nor, beggin' your pardon, missie, yours

to ask,' said Giles, fast relapsing into his usual grumpiness, though, to tell the truth, he was beginning to feel a 'sneaking kindliness' at the bottom of his heart for this very irrepressible young lady.

'Amy,' said Kenelm, 'I think you are rather too bad. You should thank Giles for showing you such a lot.'

'So I do, I'm sure,' said Amy. 'But you see, when I am so interested I can't help asking questions. And it does seem stupid to have gates and doors—after all they are far more like doors than gates, aren't they?' and she glanced again at the thick, dark palings, where only the slightest glimmer of light behind showed the break where the heavy gates were hinged—'that are never used or opened. And, oh, by-the-by, that reminds me—*can* you tell me where that door in our little schoolroom, the room behind the dining-room, opens into? It is not rude to ask questions about our own house, is it?' she

ended, with an appealing smile to the old man.

But he did not smile back in return.

‘No, miss, I can’t say. But it’s of no use, else it’d have been left open;’ and with that he turned on his heel and stumped off in the direction of the Lodge, Amy looking after him rather blankly.

‘Now, Amy,’ said Kenelm, ‘for once you have made a mess of it. You did work up the old fellow rather cleverly, I allow, at the first. But why didn’t you stop in time, when he said he had no more to say? You’ve put his back up now, and if there *is* any mystery about the Towers we’ll never find it out.’

‘Rubbish!’ said Amy. ‘I know what I’m about. I’ve found out all I expected and more. There *is* a mystery, but old Giles wouldn’t have told us anything more whatever I had said or not said. But I’m surer than ever now that there *is* something, and it has to do with that door. Mark my words, Ken.’

Whether he 'marked' them or not, they certainly had the effect of stopping his reproaches. He said nothing for a minute or two, but stood staring at the palings, his hands in his pockets, whistling softly.

Amy, glancing at him, noticed the direction of his eyes, and it reminded her of something she had for the moment forgotten.

'Oh Ken, by-the-by,' she began again, 'why did you stop short just now when you were saying to Giles that of course it was perfectly clear that we weren't to go farther than the palings? I knew you were going to say something more by the way you changed the sentence.'

'Well,' Ken replied, 'to tell the truth, I was thinking to myself that, supposing the palings don't go all the way round, it would not be so perfectly clear, and all the better if it isn't, for then we couldn't be blamed for trespassing. And I don't believe they do. Farther on'—and he pointed to the right—

'where the wood gets still thicker and overgrown, I shouldn't wonder if the palings stop. Any way, I mean to find out; only'——

'Only what?'

'I don't want to do anything, well—sneaking, you know,' said Kenelm hesitatingly.

'Of course not,' said Amy; 'but really, you can't call it sneaking to find out all we can about the place. It's just exploring, and exploring is half the fun of coming to anywhere new. Mamma knows we mean to explore, and this afternoon I shall ask her to come out here with us, and I'll tell her all Giles told us about the last squire of Greyling, and his taking off his hat to his old home. I'm sure she will think it awfully interesting and romantic. But do you know, Ken, I believe that's one o'clock striking—did you hear it?'

'Yes,' said Kenelm; 'it's the church clock. I heard it in the night, though it must be quite half a mile away. I suppose it depends on the wind.'

‘Well, we must hurry in,’ said Amy. ‘I’m awfully hungry; aren’t you?’ .

And they ran off, though once they had left the wide path it was not so easy to keep up the pace without risk of collision with the branches overhead and roots underfoot of the overgrown trees and brushwood. They passed old Giles working very stolidly at his asparagus beds, and it seemed to Amy that he gave something between a snort and a grunt as he caught sight of them, but whether of approval or disapproval she could not tell.

They were only just in time to escape a reprimand for being late.

‘What have you been doing?’ said Viva. ‘Mamma and I strolled round the garden looking for you after we came in. And we had to unharness the donkey ourselves, for we couldn’t find the gardener either.’

‘I unharnessed him, Viva,’ said Doff importantly. ‘You couldn’t never have man-

aged him without me; you know you couldn't.'

'Well, aren't you one of "ourselves"?' said Viva. 'I only said we had to do him "ourselves," meaning we couldn't find the old man.'

'He was better employed,' said Kenelm rather sarcastically. 'He was talking to Amy and me, and showing us over the grounds.'

'Oh,' said Viva, with great interest, 'did he show you the Towers part?'

'Of course,' Amy replied; 'that's the whole point of it. We didn't need him to show us our own grounds.'

'And,' continued Viva, 'did you ask him about the locked-up door in?'——

'Never mind about that just now,' said Amy, interrupting her. 'I have ever so much to tell, mamma,' turning to her mother. 'Will you come out with us after dinner'—for the whole party was now at table—'and let us show you the way into the Towers shrubberies? It is so interesting, you don't know.'

‘But I hope you have been discreet, my dear,’ said Mrs Landor, with a touch of anxiety, for she well knew Amy’s impulsiveness and determination to carry out anything she had set her mind on. ‘It would not do to seem prying into our neighbour’s—or rather landlord’s—affairs, nor to be cross-questioning old Giles.’

‘Why, mamma,’ said Amy, ‘you talk almost as if you yourself thought there *was* some secret. You haven’t heard anything about the Towers that you don’t want to tell *us*, have you?’

‘If I had,’ said Mrs Landor, smiling, ‘I should have half-told the secret by arousing your suspicions. No, I know nothing whatever, and I have no reason to think there is anything to know. Perhaps your certainty that there is a mystery has unconsciously got into my imagination too, Amy. What is it that the gardener has been telling you?’

‘Oh, nothing to do with *now*,’ said Amy. ‘But it really sounds like an old story, and it

seems to make the Towers still more—romantic—I think that is the word I mean.’

And then she went on to tell her mother and the others all that she and Kenelm had heard from the gardener.

‘So you see, mamma, we haven’t got a landlord—Greyling must belong to a woman, as the last squire left no sons, only a daughter.’

‘But *she* may have had sons, even though their name was not the old name,’ said Viva.

Amy looked rather puzzled.

‘Didn’t Giles say something about there only being daughters still?’ she asked Kenelm.

He shook his head.

‘I don’t remember his saying so,’ he replied. ‘He got rather shut up again when his story came nearer present times.’

‘It really is a romantic little history,’ said Mrs Landor, ‘and melancholy too. No doubt there are many such connected with old, old houses which, like their owners, have seen better days. Yes, Amy, I should like very

much to go round the grounds with you and Ken. I have one or two letters to write first, for the post goes out early, but I shall be ready in an hour or so. In the meantime I think you would do well to stay quietly in the school-room, for you have been running about all day, and the change from London to this bracing air may rather tire you at first. Dorrie dear, you had better go up to nurse. I declare you are yawning already! It isn't quite bedtime yet, but you can have a little sleep if you are inclined.'

Dora got down from her chair with her usual deliberateness.

'Of course I won't go to sleep,' she said, with great dignity. 'It'd be like a baby, mamma. You come up with me, Doff, and we'll tell each other stories;' and the two went off together.

'Amy,' said Viva when the elder sisters were by themselves in the schoolroom, 'I believe I know what put it into your head about Greyling

belonging to a woman. You've been thinking about that lady we saw in the square gardens at home—the young one in mourning, I mean.'

Amy started.

'No,' she said; 'I'd really forgotten about that; but I'm glad you have reminded me of it. For you're sure, quite sure, aren't you, that they did speak of Greyling?'

'Yes,' said Viva, 'I'm quite sure. It wasn't our fancy, though mamma thought it was.'

Amy sat in silence for a few moments, her eyes fixed on the mysterious door.

'Viva,' she said, impressively, at last, 'it's all very queer. I do seriously believe there's something to be found out. And in the bottom of his heart I believe Ken thinks so too. But I don't want to be laughed at, and I know it's true that I am rather fanciful; so don't say any more to mamma about it all, except, of course, what Giles told us; but don't let's say any more about the door.'

Viva looked doubtful.

‘You’re not going to *do* anything—anything that mamma mightn’t like, are you? Remember what she said about prying,’ she replied.

‘It isn’t prying into our neighbour’s affairs to want to know where the doors of our own house open into,’ replied Amy, ‘and of course I’m not going to do anything I shouldn’t. But even if it all comes to nothing, it makes our being here much more interesting to think of there being a mystery; and mamma knows that was why I wanted to come here so much—because of the ruins, you know, and the oldness, and all that.’

So saying she jumped up from her seat and ran across the room, going down on her knees before the empty keyhole of the locked door.

‘There must be a key sticking in on the other side, for it can’t be only a cupboard. I feel the draught so plainly, even more than before,’ she exclaimed.

‘But you forget,’ said Viva, joining her, ‘we settled that there couldn’t be a key in it, just

because of that draught, and the reason of our not seeing light through the keyhole may be that it leads into a dark cellar.'

'Oh yes,' said Amy, suddenly recollecting herself. 'I forgot, Viva, that you don't know what Ken and I did find out;' and she quickly described to her sister the queer-shaped 'lean-to' they had discovered from the bedroom window above.

Viva's face did not show much satisfaction.

'It's all very uncomfortable and rather frightening,' she said in a somewhat complaining tone. 'I don't want mysteries and adventures, and I shall ask mamma to give us a room at the other side of the house.'

'Oh no, Viva!' exclaimed Amy in dismay, 'you really mustn't. There's nothing frightening at all. It's only interesting; and if you would really rather I didn't, I'll promise not to say any more about it.'

'No—o,' said Viva, who was extremely good-natured and very reluctant to thwart Amy in

any of her fancies. 'I'm not as silly as that.'

'Then promise me that you won't say any more about it; I mean, don't let mamma think I could be so naughty and unkind as to frighten you. There she is calling us!'

'Of course I wouldn't,' answered Viva, 'and after all I dare say there's nothing in it all but fancy.'

But the afternoon was not to pass without something happening to rouse their curiosity still further. For this same curiosity was not by any means unshared by Viva, though she was naturally less daring and adventurous than her sister.





CHAPTER VII.

‘G. L. D.’



ENELM and Amy were very proud to act as guides to their mother, and delighted to see that she shared the impression made on them by the strange aspect of the Towers grounds.

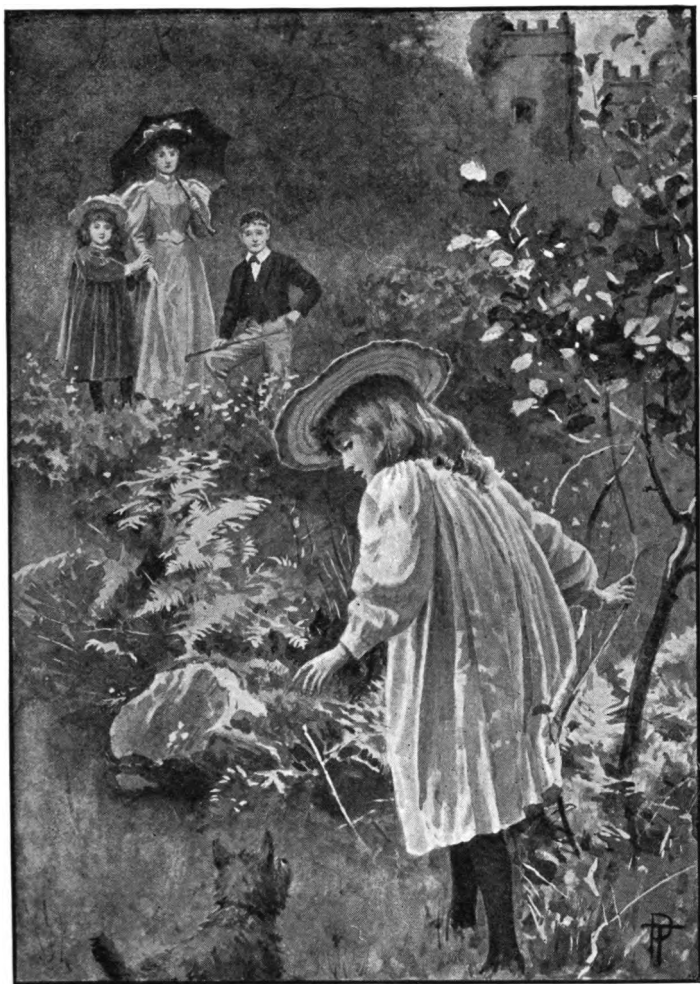
‘It is certainly a very uncommon sort of place,’ she said as they all stood still on the wide path, or drive, at some little distance from the high palings, with their closed gates, behind which the ruins in all their ruggedness showed out clearly against the sky. ‘The mixture of

care and neglect is so curious,' she went on. 'I know what it reminds me of.'

'Do tell us, mamma,' said Amy, struck by her mother's half-dreamy tone.

'It was of a place I saw when I was a child,' said Mrs Landor, 'in France—I think it was in Normandy—which I have never forgotten—the grounds of an old château which had been burnt down in the Revolution. Nothing remained of the house itself, but the approach to it was quite perfect. There stood the great gates of beautifully wrought iron, on each side of what had evidently been a carefully kept avenue, leading now to nothing. Inside, where the flower-garden must once have been, the roses, through lapse of time and neglect, had fallen back into their wild state—there were masses of them, I remember, just dog-roses, and all sorts of other flowers in picturesque confusion—half flowers, half weeds. It was curiously melancholy.'

'How interesting!' said Amy. 'If Doff was



Viva, who was standing behind the others, gave a little scream.

here he would say it was like one of his fairy-stories. Yes, mamma, you do understand so well! How I wish we could see through these gates!'

In the silence—for it was a very still day—there came the sound of a faint rustling, or pattering rather, in the brushwood on their right, and suddenly Viva, who was standing behind the others, gave a little scream.

'What is it?' said Amy quickly. 'Not a snake?'—as if snakes were in the habit of running about on four feet and sniffing little girls' legs. For that was what had startled Viva.

'No, no,' she cried, jumping aside, and nearly knocking down her sister as she did so. 'No; it's a dog, Amy. I do hope it's not mad!'

'Oh, you silly!' said Kenelm, stooping to pat the little creature. 'He's a perfect beauty, and he must be a great pet! See how friendly he is!'

Kenelm was right; the dog was a beauty, a little thoroughbred Scotch terrier with appeal-

ing eyes and most perfect manners; for, feeling himself at home, he evidently thought it devolved upon him to welcome the strangers with all the courtesy he could show. He trotted from one to another, wagging his tail and giving short, amiable barks.

'Now where can you have come from?' said Kenelm. 'You can't belong to old Giles, I'm sure.'

'Look at his collar,' said Amy, for her sharp eyes had caught sight of a scarlet leather band gleaming through the thick, tufty coat. 'It may have a name on.'

'Yes,' said Ken after examining it; 'at least it has initials—"G. L. D., Cootes Warren."'

'Cootes Warren,' repeated Mrs Landor. 'I wonder where that is. It must be some other house near here, I suppose, where the dog has strayed from, though I think I was told there were no gentlemen's places within a long distance of Greyling.'

And certainly the little dog showed no signs

of feeling himself astray, nor of having run any distance.

'I don't think so, mamma,' said Kenelm; 'the little chap's quite at home. By the way he's wagging his tail you can see he's welcoming us. I do wonder whom he belongs to.'

As he spoke there came the sound of a clear silvery whistle. Their new friend pricked up his ears at once and stood listening. The whistle was repeated. Then the little dog turned, and glancing at them apologetically, as if to say, 'I am very sorry to have to leave you so hastily, but it cannot be helped,' trotted off, and was soon lost to sight among the bushes.

The children and their mother looked after him in silence. They all seemed to have a feeling of expecting something more, and, sure enough, in another moment the whistle was heard for the third time, and now a voice as well was clearly to be distinguished—a woman's voice, and its tone sounded rather anxious.

'Shag, Shag! Where are you, naughty Shag? Come back!'

Then the sound of little Shag's feet, as they pattered over the carpet of last year's leaves, crisp and dry, for no rain had fallen for some time, told of his scampering towards his mistress, and a cheery bark or two announced his evident arrival at her feet.

Amy glanced at her brother with a puzzled expression.

'It does seem as if there must be somebody living at the Towers,' said Mrs Landor. 'It is rather curious that the old gardener never mentioned it; but after all,' she went on, 'we were told that the owners sometimes come down, though I had the impression that it was only to spend the day, for a picnic or that kind of thing. I did not imagine that there were any habitable rooms left.'

'Old Giles lives there,' said Amy; 'he has never pretended he didn't. Have you never heard the name of the people it belongs to, mamma?'

Mrs Landor considered for a moment.

'I can't quite remember,' she said. 'We inquired about so many houses that my memory is a little confused. I think we were told the name at the beginning. But it was not till we came to enter into more particulars that we were told so specially about some part of the grounds being kept private. And I don't think the name was again alluded to.'

'I wish you could remember what it was,' said Amy.

'Why, my dear child, what does it matter?' said her mother, for she was always a little on the watch to check Amy's inquisitiveness.

'I don't say it does matter, mamma,' said Amy in a slightly aggrieved tone, 'but after the old story Giles told us, and—and—it's only natural,' she broke off, 'to want to know the name of the family.'

'Can't you remember if it began with "D," mamma?' said Kenelm.

'Why "D"?' asked his mother.

'Because that was the last letter of the initials on the dog's collar,' he replied.

Mrs Landor shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I think it was a short name, but that's all I can say. And in any case, Amy, it wouldn't be the same as that of the original family, for the point of the legend was that no one of the name was to own Greyling again. But don't let us stand about any longer. I should like to get more into the open. Didn't you say something about a brook that runs through the fields?' And the little party turned in the direction she spoke of.

The next day or two passed uneventfully. Nothing new occurred to whet Amy's curiosity, and she was too afraid of being laughed at by her brother and sister, or of displeasing her mother by harping on the subject, to allude to it again except once or twice when alone with Kenelm or Viva; for, taken singly, neither of them was really indifferent to Amy's ideas, though each felt a little ashamed of owning to this.

But as for forgetting all about it, as Viva sometimes wished her sister would—especially when it grew dark in the evenings, and the sight of the locked door in the schoolroom made the younger girl feel rather creepy, or in the middle of the night when awakened by the melancholy hoot of an owl—*that*, as Amy emphatically declared, was quite impossible.

The time for Mrs Landor's leaving them was close at hand. She was only waiting for Miss Sheppard's arrival to fix it definitely. But, however carefully one plans things, one can never ensure being able to carry out one's intentions. The very morning before the day on which their governess was expected, Mrs Landor received a letter which disconcerted her a good deal. It was to say that scarlet fever had broken out at Miss Sheppard's home, and though there was no fear of her taking it herself, she felt it would not be right to risk bringing the infection to Greyling.

'The doctor says,' she wrote, 'that I must

go through at least a fortnight's quarantine, so I am starting at once to stay with an aunt where there are no children. I am very, very sorry for the inconvenience to you, but of course it is far better to have found it out in time, to avoid all risk of infection for the children.'

Mrs Landor looked up with a face of some consternation.

'Dear me!' she exclaimed. 'This *is* an upset.'

'What is it, mamma?' exclaimed the little girls together. Kenelm rather prided himself on being above surprises.

'It is a letter from Miss Sheppard,' replied their mother, and then she told them its contents.

The children were fond of their governess, but still it would not be true to say that their faces expressed any very lively distress at the news. Viva perhaps looked more concerned than Amy.

'You mustn't mind about it, mamma,' said the latter reassuringly. 'We shall be all right here with nurse. Of course, it would be nicest of all if you could stay with us, but you really needn't worry about us.'

'No,' her mother agreed. 'I don't think you will come to any harm. Now that I have seen the place, I shall feel much better satisfied about you. Still, it is rather serious for you, Ken—about your lessons, I mean.'

For Miss Sheppard was quite qualified to work him up in certain subjects in which he was rather deficient.

Kenelm did not answer at once. He was far from a thoughtless boy.

'If it is only for two or three weeks, mamma,' he said at last, 'I think I can manage all right. Amy might help me in French a little, for she's much better at it than I am. Of course, if Miss Sheppard couldn't come for a long time, I'd need somebody else. Perhaps there's some clergyman about here

that could give me lessons like Mr Turner at Coving.'

'I am afraid not,' said Mrs Landor; 'there is no clergyman in the village. The vicar of Mayford—two or three miles off—looks after the parish. There is only one service near here every Sunday. It is such a tiny place. Still, if needful, we can make further inquiries.'

'I'll really do my best,' said Kenelm.

'And after all, mamma,' added Amy, 'you didn't mean us to work very hard when Miss Sheppard first came here. It was to count for Easter holidays—don't you remember?'

'What a good thing it is,' added Viva, 'that we didn't all get scarlet fever!'

Mrs Landor could not help smiling at her old-fashioned tone.

'You must keep out of any kind of scrape,' said their mother as they got up from the table. 'I don't want any telegrams to say you have broken your arms or anything of that kind. And that reminds me that there must be no

question of your exploring the ruins till your father comes down.'

'I don't know that we'll ever have a chance of it,' said Kenelm. 'Old Giles never hinted at such a thing being possible—though perhaps it would be different if papa spoke to him.'

'There'd be no fun in going over the ruins with *Giles*,' said Amy; 'what *we* should like is poking about by ourselves.'

Her mother caught the words and turned to her quickly.

'My dear child, you must put everything of the kind out of your head. It would probably be very dangerous; and besides that, we have no right to intrude on our neighbours; we should be very glad to have the run of the grounds as much as we have.'

'Then do you really think we *have* neighbours in the Towers?' said Amy eagerly.

'I have not thought about it,' said her mother, 'and it really doesn't matter to us if there is any one living there or not.'

No more was said on the subject before Mrs Landor left Greyling the next day but one. Poor little Dorrie took her mother's going a good deal to heart, and her elder sisters promised to do their best to cheer her up.

'I leave her in your special charge, Amy,' were almost Mrs Landor's last words to her eldest daughter. She knew that with a character like Amy's there was nothing more 'steady' than a feeling of responsibility, and it was without any real misgiving that she waved good-bye to the four children as they stood in the porch to see her, escorted by Kenelm, off to the station.

'Now,' said Amy briskly as they turned back into the house, 'I want to talk to you, Viva, about how we'd best settle our time. You can stay with us, too, Dorrie dear,' she went on kindly, for the little girl was winking hard to keep away the tears which were very near the surface.

Viva followed them into the schoolroom, though half reluctantly.

'I really don't think you need begin any of your plans the moment mamma has gone,' she said. 'It's a nice, fine day; let's do whatever we want to just now.'

But Amy was not so easily turned from any project she had got into her head.

'No, Viva,' she said; 'it's much better to arrange things a little. I was thinking about it in bed, for I woke very early this morning.'

'You always do, I think,' said Viva; 'I wish you didn't! Well, what is it you want us to do?'

Amy produced a rather grimy piece of paper from her pocket.

'I've sketched it out,' she said importantly. 'You see, Viva, we must do some lessons ourselves every day, as we always do in holidays, and then we've promised to help Ken with his French, and, perhaps, with some other things. So I think we'd better keep two hours

every morning—say from nine to eleven—for schoolroom work. Then at eleven we might go a proper walk with nurse and the little ones, and have the afternoons really to ourselves. Nurse likes sitting about in the afternoons, I know, so Dorrie would be all right with her, and *we* should be all right with Ken. Then when we come in—after tea—we might play games and write to mamma. I mean to keep a sort of diary for her of what we do every day, and send it to her twice a week. I asked her about it, and she said she'd like it very much.'

'All right,' said Viva; 'I don't mind; only, if I'm not inclined to go scrambling about with you all the afternoon, you won't force me to, will you? You can have Ken, and Doff too, if you want him.'

'No, thank you,' said Amy. 'He always wants to sit down and read; besides, nurse couldn't let him or Dorrie go out much without her.'

'But sometimes we may, mayn't we?' said Dorrie plaintively. 'If Viva doesn't want to come, won't you sometimes take me instead of her? I'd like to go with you and Ken! He always carries me on his shoulder when I'm tired.'

'Well, we'll see,' said Amy. 'I dare say you may come with us sometimes. We'll tell Ken about it when he comes in.'

Kenelm made no objections to Amy's projects; but as he was really anxious to get on with his work, he added a condition, which was, that he should be free to stay in some part of the afternoon if he found that the morning and evening hours were not enough for the amount he knew he should do.

But this first day was to be an entire holiday, and out of kindness to her little sister, Amy had to give in to what she called a 'nursery-walk,' all together, for the first part of the afternoon.

They set off in a different direction from any which they had yet taken, following the road to the right of their own entrance, and thus

passing the front of the Towers grounds. The entrance on this side to the old place was not an imposing one. It was little more than a bridle-path across a field, leading to an ordinary gate in a thick hedge.

'Do let us go close up to the gate,' said Amy; 'we could see something of this side of the ruins!'

But nurse was not very ready to do so. Her ideas of a walk were very correct ones, allowing of no loitering or exploring; nor was she by any means sure that peeping into other people's grounds was a polite proceeding.

'I can't think, Miss Amy, why you're not satisfied with your own house and garden, and a nice walk along the road for a change.'

So Amy had to content herself with a view in the distance of the tempting gate, and in her own mind she congratulated herself that nurse had not stood out for more than *one* 'nice walk' a day, which would leave her free to follow her own devices at other times.



‘Never mind, I’ll go wif you to see the ruins if Ken won’t.’

As they walked on, a good deal, both to strike and interest, came in view, the country growing more and more bleak and yet picturesque as they mounted higher.

'How jolly it would be to climb some of those hills!' said Kenelm. 'When papa comes down I hope he'll go some good walks with me.'

'And why not us too?' said Amy rather crossly. 'We're not to go near the ruins, or to explore the grounds, or anything amusing. And now you don't even want us to go up the hills with you. We might as well have gone to that other horrid dull place.'

'Poor Amy!' said little Dorrie, slipping her hand into her elder sister's. 'Never mind, I'll go wif you to see the ruins if Ken won't. We'll go all by ourselves, won't we?'

'Darling,' said Amy, 'yes; I'll take you as near as we may go. And p'raps we'll meet the dear little dog again.'

'Now, Miss Amy,' said nurse, 'I can't have you tantalising the child. You know quite

well you promised your mamma to keep away from those nasty dangerous places.'

'I'm not going to break my promises,' said Amy indignantly. 'You needn't be afraid.'

But in her heart she added to herself:

'Mamma never said I wasn't to look through the gate, and we've never been told anything about this side of the grounds. There's no reason why I shouldn't explore as much as I can—without disobeying, of course. Viva's too lazy, really; but I'll have a talk with Ken about it afterwards.'

This idea restored her to good-humour, and their walk proved a pleasant one. They returned the same way that they had gone, as nurse had a wholesome fear of losing herself and being benighted among the 'mountains,' as she called them; so that Amy had another opportunity of feasting her eyes on the mysterious Towers, and making her plans for obtaining a nearer view of them.



CHAPTER VIII.

UNLOCKED BUT NOT OPENED.

WHEN tea was over that afternoon Viva declared herself too tired to go out any more, and good-naturedly proposed to read a story aloud to the little ones. This suited Amy very well.

‘*I’m* not tired,’ she said, ‘and of course you’re not, Ken. Let’s go out together. You’re not going to do any lessons at all to-day, are you?’

Kenelm hesitated. He *had* intended to begin a little work that very evening; but though

older than Amy, in some ways he looked up to her as his superior in cleverness and quickness, and he was always rather flattered when she expressed any special wish for his society. And besides this, he was a very kind-hearted boy.

‘Well, no,’ he replied. ‘I don’t think I need begin till to-morrow, as we’re going then to be very regular. Come along, Amy. Where do you want to go?’

Amy did not reply. And when they found themselves out of doors, rather to her brother’s surprise, she set off towards the road in front of the house.

‘Why, that’s where we’ve just been,’ said Ken. ‘Don’t you think it would be better fun to go through the kitchen-garden into the other grounds and explore a little?’

Amy was very pleased to find her brother in this mood.

‘That’s just what I want to do,’ she said, ‘but I want to go at it from the other side.

Let's run across the field, Ken, and see what is to be seen through the gate in the hedge. I suppose it is now the regular entrance to the Towers.'

'Yes,' said Kenelm. 'The drive through the wood at the back *used* to go out into the road, but it's been unused for so long that it's got all overgrown. I found that out for myself; you can just see where there *was* a drive across what is now all field.'

By this time they had reached that part of the road which faced the front entrance to the Towers, and a short run brought them up to the gate.

'Let's keep behind the hedge for a minute or two,' said Amy cautiously, 'just for fear that any one should be walking about inside.'

Kenelm made no objections to this; but there proved to be no cause for Amy's misgivings. Inside the grounds there was almost absolute stillness. No sound was to be heard save the soft whisper of the wind among the trees, or the

rustle of a belated autumn leaf as it dropped. Even the birds seemed already going to rest.

So the children took courage and gazed boldly in through the bars of the rickety old gate. As far as they could see, the path, or drive as it might be called, though rather a rough one, ran through neglected shrubberies for some distance. But farther ahead they caught a glimpse of smooth, well-kept lawns surrounded by a low wire fence or light paling of some kind.

'I believe there's a bit of pretty garden close round the house,' said Amy; and as she spoke the gate on which she was unconsciously leaning swung inwards, as if to invite them to enter.

'Let's go in a tiny bit, Ken,' she said; 'nobody has told us not to on this side, and I would so like to see the ruins a little closer.'

They strolled slowly some distance up the drive till they reached a point whence they saw enough to prove that Amy's surmise was correct. She caught her brother's arm eagerly.

‘Oh! we must go close up to that fence,’ she half-whispered. ‘Then we should see it all.’

Kenelm by this time was under the fascination of discovery, and they walked on in silence, stepping as lightly as they could and keeping a wary lookout, so that if they caught sight of any one they could quickly retrace their steps. But when they got close up to the little gate in the wire, the prospect before them was so attractive that they forgot everything except pleasure in gazing at it.

The gray old ruins, in part overgrown with ivy, rose in their venerable ruggedness in the centre of a charming stretch of greensward, while here and there carefully tended flower-beds promised before long to add brilliant colouring to the pretty scene—for this was the sheltered side of the Towers, facing south, and protected in great measure by the rising ground and thickly-growing trees in the rear of the house.

‘Isn’t it lovely?’ said Amy enthusiastically, though under her breath. ‘What a big place it must have been long ago!’

‘I don’t see any part of it from here that can be inhabited,’ said Kenelm. ‘It looks all ruins, though not tumble-down ones; but there’s no window with any glass in it.’

‘And no door,’ added Amy; ‘and yet you’d think that this pretty bit of garden would be on the side that’s lived in!’

‘It’s the sheltered side,’ said Kenelm; ‘and I think—yes, Amy—there’s a sort of archway over there on the left that very likely leads to a door, and probably there’s some more lawn round that corner.’

‘I see,’ said his sister, peering eagerly in the direction he pointed out. ‘Oh yes; what a lovely, dark, arched passage! Oh, if we could but see where it goes to!’

‘Not much chance of that,’ said Kenelm. ‘I don’t know what old Giles would say if he found us here.’

Amy started.

'Oh Ken!' she whispered, 'don't say such a thing. I should be terrified out of my life if any one saw us;' and she turned as if to hurry away.

'Then you shouldn't have'—— began her brother; but before he had time to finish his sentence he too started, for the sound of approaching footsteps, ringing sharply as if on stone pavement, struck their ears.

There was no question of concealing themselves, though they instinctively drew back a little, and in fact, thanks to the shrubbery behind them, and their dark tweed clothes, they were less conspicuous to any one emerging from the passage into the light than they imagined themselves.

They stood there in trembling expectation, the seconds seeming minutes long, till suddenly a figure came into view at the entrance of the archway, stood there for a moment glancing round, and then disappeared again. So momen-

tary had been their view of it that it was impossible to describe it accurately, though both agreed that it was not old Giles, when, that is to say, they had hurried back along the path till they felt themselves at a safe distance, and ventured to talk again.

‘Was it a man or a woman?’ said Amy breathlessly.

‘It might have been either,’ Kenelm answered. ‘I saw nothing but a head with something dark thrown over it.’

‘But there was something white too,’ said Amy. ‘It might have been a nun!’

‘Just as likely a monk!’ said Kenelm. ‘Your head always runs on such fanciful things. I dare say it was only old Giles’s wife with a frilled cap on, and a shawl over that.’

‘No,’ said Amy, ‘I’m sure it wasn’t any one old; she—I think it was a woman—moved so quickly! I can’t help wondering’—— and here she broke off. ‘Ken,’ she went on after a

moment's silence, 'let's settle one thing. Don't tell Viva about it!'

'Why not?' said her brother.

'Oh, she's so silly,' said Amy; 'she gets frightened, and she'd speak of it to nurse, and nurse would begin thinking we were getting into mischief; and, after all, we haven't done anything the least wrong.'

'No—o,' said Kenelm, 'I suppose not. What were you going to say you couldn't help wondering about, Amy?'

'It came into my head again,' said Amy, 'about the ladies we heard talking in the square gardens. We told you about it at the time, Ken, didn't we?'

'Yes,' he replied; 'but I don't remember exactly what it was.'

'It was about something the girl was going to do which would require "a good deal of courage." And then both Viva and I felt sure that she named Greyling. She spoke of its being "very isolated," and that the village

people were frightened of it. Doesn't it all seem to match very curiously ?'

'Except that we've never heard anything of the people about being frightened of Greyling,' answered Ken.

'No,' Amy agreed, 'not exactly. But still, from what old Giles told us, you can easily fancy that there might be a feeling about the place—that it was unlucky, or something of that kind.'

They were out on the open road again by this time. Amy looked back longingly through the gate. She had completely recovered from her momentary fright, and was already planning another voyage of discovery on the first opportunity.

'The next time you and I get a chance of exploring by ourselves,' she began again, 'I think we might go round by the back and try what you thought of, Ken—I mean, whether we couldn't get nearer the Towers through the shrubbery, where the palings come to an end,

as they very likely do. Any way, there must be some entrance there that Giles uses. And the little dog, too! He must have got out somehow; and the person calling him, whoever it was, was evidently on our side of those palings.'

'I don't mind—*investigating* a little,' said Ken rather pompously, 'but I don't want to be pulled up for trespassing, all the same, Amy.'

'Do you suppose *I* do?' asked his sister. 'Any way, remember to say nothing about what we've seen this evening.'

I should be sorry to have to relate what Amy's dreams were that night—very wonderful and exciting, I am quite sure, for her brain was now fuller than ever of the mysteries which seemed to be thickening round Greyling Towers. But for two or three days to come she had no good chance of carrying further any of her many schemes for unravelling them.

To begin with, the weather changed to rain, and though it cleared up a little in the afternoon, nurse would not hear of any ramblings

about in the wet shrubberies. All she would allow was a regulation walk along the road towards the village and back again, much to the children's disgust. The only distraction Amy could invent was to privately collect all the keys she could find and try them, one after the other, in the lock of the closed door. But these efforts seemed all in vain. Most of the keys wouldn't go in at all; and, of the two or three that did, not one of them could she succeed in turning the least little bit, in spite of oiling them by the help of a feather, blowing into the keyhole, and every manœuvre of the kind she and her brothers and sisters could think of.

For she did not attempt to hide these experiments from the others, even from Viva, though the younger sister trembled with fear every time a new key was tried, lest it should possibly prove successful, and the mysterious door be flung open to reveal secrets in comparison with which poor Fatima's discoveries in the fateful chamber would sink into insignificance.

'It's no use,' cried Amy petulantly as she drew out the last key. 'It's really too absurd to have a door in our own house that we don't know the use of. I do think, Ken, you might try to get something out of old Giles about it.'

'I think you've gone quite far enough with old Giles, if you ask my opinion,' said Kenelm. 'He's grumpier than ever now. Every time I come across him he gapes after me as if he thought I had no right to be there. I hope it wasn't his wife'——

Amy turned upon him sharply; but luckily for the family peace, before she had time to speak, there came an interruption in the shape of Doff, looking very important, and with something in his hand which he evidently did not want the others to see, till it suited him to show it.

'What do you want?' said Kenelm.

'You are all very stupid,' said Doff; 'you have only taken the keys of the rooms, and

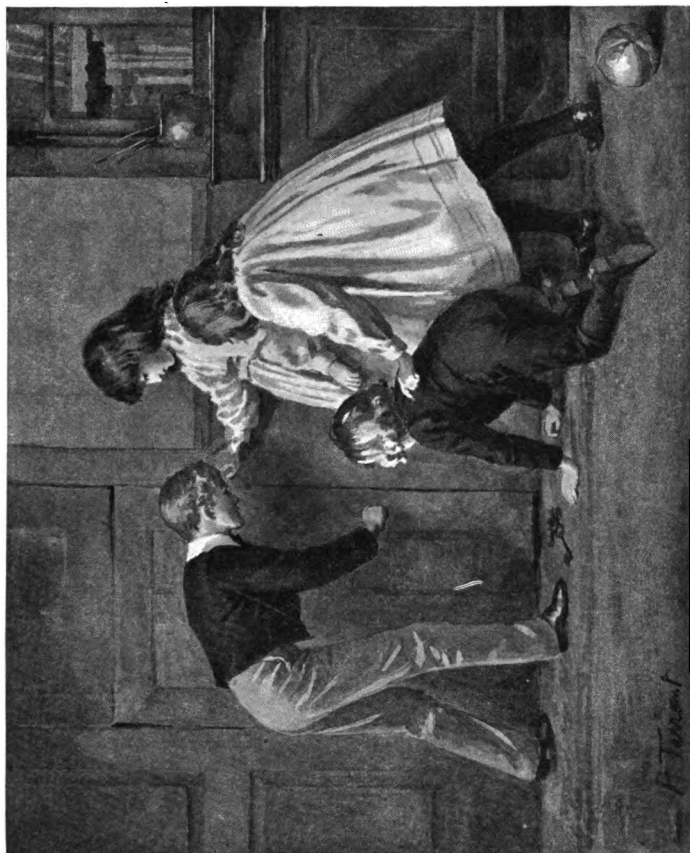
I've been out to the stables. The keys there are a much older kind, and if this door hasn't been opened for lots and lots of years, most likely it's an older kind of lock, too.'

'There's something in that,' said Kenelm condescendingly. 'Of course the rooms and all the inside of the house must have been done up not so very long ago; none of the keys you've got, Amy, seem old-fashioned. Let's have a look at yours, Doff.'

The little boy held out two keys, one a good deal larger than the other.

'This is the one of the outside stable-door,' he said, touching it; 'and this,' pointing to the other, 'is the one of the door between the stable and the coach-house, inside.'

The first one Kenelm immediately rejected as far too big. The second he slipped into the hole without difficulty, and—yes—*turned!* They all stood round in breathless silence. The lock was opened, for the bolt had



‘What’s the matter now?’ said Kenelm impatiently.

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disappeared, and in another moment, as Kenelm turned the handle, they expected the door itself to be flung back and the secret chamber—if such there were—to be revealed. But nothing of the kind happened!

‘What’s the matter now?’ said Kenelm impatiently, as he stooped to examine more closely the cause of this resistance. ‘Hollo!’ he exclaimed, ‘there must be a bolt on the other side. Yes, I see it, higher up! Look, Amy.’

‘*How* provoking!’ cried his sister. ‘Just when I thought Doff was going to turn out a sort of Hop-of-my-thumb—except that he’s too fat. Don’t you think we might *shake* it open, Ken, possibly? It isn’t as firm as it was, nearly!’

Kenelm seized the handle again and shook it hard, but it only rattled.

‘There is not a chance of opening it,’ he said. ‘It must be a strong bolt—you can see how thick it is, not like a staple and a

hook—and it's sure to be awfully rusty, too. But any way, Amy, you should be glad of one thing: it proves—the bolt inside, I mean—that there is a room—no—a stair, or sloping passage of some kind; it can't be a room from the shape outside; any way, it is something more than a cupboard, as it's bolted from the inside.'

Amy looked extremely interested and excited.

'Yes,' she said, 'it makes it much more of a real mystery; only'—in a tone of disappointment—'what's the good of it if we can *never* open the door and find out any more?'

'*Never* is a long word,' said Kenelm; though, to tell the truth, he had small hopes of penetrating any farther. 'What about the lock?' he went on. 'Shall we leave it open? So that if any one ever does take it into his head to pay us a visit from the dungeons, or whatever it is that the

passage leads to, he'll have no difficulty in coming in upon us! It would be more hospitable, don't you'——

But here he was interrupted by a scream from Viva.

'You *mustn't* leave it open,' she cried. 'If you do I'll tell nurse this very minute, and I'll write to mamma! I wouldn't sleep the least bit all night, and I should be frightened all day, too, thinking what might come through the door! You *must* lock it again, Ken, and let Doff put the key back where he found it.'

Kenelm laughed, but he did as she asked, for he saw that she was really trembling. And though Amy said nothing, she was not in reality sorry to have the door safely locked up again, under cover of Viva's timidity. For, after all, her courage was more love of adventure than anything else, and she would scarcely have liked, when she woke up in the middle of the night, to think

of the door in the room below, free for any one to make his way through from the other side.

So Doff was despatched with his two keys, and Amy had to spend some time in returning to their proper places the seven or eight she had brought away.

To everybody's relief, the rainy weather did not last long. It cleared up on the evening of the very day on which they had the try with the keys, though too late for the girls to go out; and even the next morning nurse announced at breakfast-time that she could not allow any playing about in the grounds, not at least 'for the young ladies.' It was far too wet underfoot, and overhead too for that matter, with so many trees about. They must just go a nice walk along the roads, and perhaps by to-morrow, if the sun kept out as brightly as it seemed likely to do, it would be dry enough for the shrubberies.

Amy looked up, prepared with a remonstrance; but on second thoughts she said nothing.

‘If nurse takes it into her head that I need looking after, I’ll never get a chance of any exploring,’ she thought, and for the rest of the day she was so biddable and quiet that nurse began to say to herself that Miss Amy was becoming really nearly as easy to manage as Miss Viva.

The next morning dawned so brightly that Amy felt rewarded for her patience.

‘There can be nothing to stop our running about the woods to-day,’ she thought, ‘and I am determined that the sun shall not set without my making some more discoveries!’

She would have been a little startled, however, could she have seen the result of this resolve.



CHAPTER IX.

INTRUDERS.



THE morning passed in most correct fashion. The children kept to their self-appointed hours for lessons, and there was no grumbling when the time came for nurse's beloved 'nice walk along the road.' So far all was well; but Amy was met by disappointment when, having got Ken a little to herself in front of the others, she confided to him her proposal for a good exploring 'by our two selves' in the afternoon.

Her brother, it appeared, had other fish to

fry—literally speaking, real fish which he hoped to catch.

‘I can’t go out with you this afternoon,’ he said decidedly. ‘I had a talk with old Giles this morning. He wasn’t the least grumpy. He likes me ever so much better than you, I can see, Amy. And he’s going to give himself a holiday and go fishing with me. We shall follow the brook ever so far down, till it gets much deeper and wider. He’s got leave for me to fish there as much as I like.’

Amy’s face fell.

‘You may come too, if you like,’ her brother went on, though his invitation was not of the heartiest. ‘Giles said you might. I thought it was very good-natured of him. He said he’d known young ladies that were quite as good at fishing as boys.’

‘Thank you,’ said Amy, with what she meant to be fine satire. ‘I’m very much obliged to both you and Giles, but I haven’t the very least wish to go with you.’

‘All right,’ said Kenelm indifferently, on which Amy slackened her pace to let the others come up with them.

‘I’m not going to be done out of it all by Ken and that horrid old Giles,’ she said to herself. ‘I’ll carry out my plan just the same, and this very afternoon, too.’

For she had a plan—a very distinct one—and which till now she would have hesitated to attempt without her brother’s company. This was what she had already spoken of vaguely to him, to spy the land from the other side—through the wood, that is to say, that skirted the palings in the direction whence the little dog had run out to them.

And as she walked on her spirits rose again, when it struck her that there was one advantage in this fishing expedition of Kenelm’s—it would leave her perfectly secure from the old gardener.

Yet she did not quite like the idea of exploring by herself. Not that she was afraid

of anything, but it would seem so uninteresting.

‘And if I did meet any one,’ she thought, ‘it would look rather funny for me to be quite alone. If the others were with me, or even one of them, it would seem quite natural for us to be strolling about; but it’s not the least use in the world asking Viva to come with me. She hasn’t the least bit of adventure in her, and she’s so nervous. Why, she was terrified even of the poor little dog the other day.’

Just at that moment, as if in reply to her unspoken thoughts, while she was walking along in silence, somewhat apart from the others, a little hand stole into hers.

‘Amy,’ said Dorrie in a low voice, ‘when are you going to take me out to look for the little dog? You said you would. I do so want to see him. But I don’t want nobody to come ’cept you and me, and Ken p’raps, if it’s very far to go, so that he’d carry me if I was tired. Can’t we go to-day after dinner?’

Amy glanced at the others.

‘Ken doesn’t want to come out with us to-day,’ she said. ‘He is going fishing; but the place where we met the little dog isn’t far, Dorrie. I don’t see why you and I shouldn’t go by ourselves.’

Dorrie clapped her hands.

‘That would be much the nicest,’ she said.

‘Don’t talk so loud,’ said Amy. ‘I don’t want to speak about it just yet. Leave it to me, Dorrie. I’ll settle it with nurse. You see, I don’t want Viva to come, because she’s so easily frightened. She screamed at the little dog the other day, when he ran out of the wood, as if he had been a wolf. And yet I wouldn’t like Viva to think us unkind for not wanting her.’

‘But the dog *isn’t* like a wolf,’ said Dorrie, with some misgiving, in spite of her confidence in Amy. ‘He’s a *real* dog, isn’t he? Not a wolf pretending to be one?’

‘Of course not,’ said Amy. ‘You mustn’t get

your head filled with Doff's fairy stories. I see you're thinking of Red Riding-Hood. You mustn't come with me if you're going to be fanciful.'

'Oh no, I won't be, I promise you,' said Dorrie; 'but do settle about it, Amy. Can't you ask nurse now?'

'No,' said Amy. 'I have to think it over because of Viva. But I dare say it will be all right.'

As it happened, things fitted in very well towards the forwarding of Amy's plans. Perhaps I should say *too* well, for though the little girl had no distinct intention of disobedience, she did know at the bottom of her heart that the sort of 'exploring' she had in her mind would not have met with her mother's approval. She softened it down to herself by saying she would just go a little way; there was no harm in finding out how far the palings extended. Mamma herself had felt much interested in the old story, and had even spoken

of trying to see the ruins some day when papa came—and so on. Besides, they had never been forbidden to play in the grounds; and if Ken would not come with them, that was *his* fault, not hers.

It was at dinner-time that the only difficulty in her way was removed by Viva's announcing that she did not want to go out that afternoon. She was rather tired; and, besides, she was anxious to finish a new cloak she was making for her doll, which nurse had cut out for her to give her some amusement during the two or three wet days just past.

Nurse looked up doubtfully.

'If you're really tired, Miss Viva,' she said, 'of course you mustn't go out; but it will be very dull for Miss Dorrie to stay in all the afternoon. I have some needlework I must get done, and it's not warm enough yet for sitting out. No doubt Master Kenelm and Miss Amy will be off somewhere by themselves.'

'No,' said Amy quickly; 'Ken does not want

me this afternoon. He's going fishing with Giles. But *I'm* not the least tired, nurse, and I should like to play about the grounds with Dorrie. So let her come with me; I'll take care of her.'

Nurse thought it very kind of Amy to make this proposal, and she was quite willing to agree to it, only making the condition that they should be in by tea-time, not go beyond the grounds, and return at once if there was any sign of rain.

'It *couldn't* rain to-day,' said Amy, glancing up at the sky as she spoke.

'Well, no,' nurse agreed, 'it scarcely looks like it; but still, in this part of the country, with the hills round about, and all so wild-like, it's difficult to say. Now, in London'——

'Oh nurse,' said Amy impatiently, 'what a Cockney you are! Do let us forget about London now we are out of it, and everything here is getting so nice in the fine weather. I just love the country on a day like this, and I

feel as if I never wanted to see streets and houses again.'

Nurse said no more, and about three o'clock Amy and Dorrie sallied forth, both not a little excited, though they could not exactly have said why. Amy led the way through their own kitchen-garden.

'You've never been outside our own wall, have you, Dorrie?' she asked.

'Of course I have,' Dorrie replied. 'I've been walks—long walks—you know, Amy.'

'I didn't mean that,' said her sister impatiently. 'I mean you've never been into the shrubberies which belong to the ruins—the Towers? And that's where I'm going to take you.'

She led the way to the small door in the corner, which Giles had pointed out to her. Dorrie exclaimed in delight, as soon as she found herself in the tangled coppice on the other side:

'Oh, what a nice place! It's a real wood,



'Oh, what a nice place ! It's a real wood, isn't it, Amy?'

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isn't it, Amy? If Viva was here she'd be frightened of snakes, I'm sure; but I'm not a bit afraid. Nothing could hurt us here, could it?' But, by the way she clasped Amy's hand, the elder sister felt that the child was a little timid, and it somewhat irritated her.

'It's all Viva's fault,' she said to herself. 'It is too absurd. I called nurse a Cockney, but they are far worse.'

Still, it would do no good to scold Dorrie, or even to seem to notice her fears.

'Nothing to hurt us?' Amy repeated. 'Of course not. What could there be to hurt us in a nice, pretty wood like this? And we come out of it in a moment, on to a wide path.'

So saying, she hastened on, closely followed by Dorrie, for there was not room for them to walk abreast. The little girl drew a deep breath of satisfaction when they came out on to the deserted drive. She stood and looked about her with great interest.

‘What’s that black sort of wall up there?’ she asked, pointing to the palings.

‘It’s not a wall,’ Amy answered. ‘It’s wooden palings that shut in the garden close round the Towers, or the ruins, whichever you like to call them. You can’t think what a lovely garden it is, Dorrie—ever so much prettier than anything at the Lodge.’

‘How do you know?’ asked Dorrie. ‘Can you see through anywhere if you go close up?’

Amy shook her head.

‘No,’ she said; ‘the palings are too close, and I don’t think there are any holes in them. P’raps,’ she went on, ‘they stop farther along. I don’t know, for we’ve never looked; but there must be some sort of way that old Giles goes by.’

‘Then how do you know about the pretty garden?’

‘Oh, we saw it from the other side—Ken and I did—through that gate, you know, across the field from the high-road in front.’

Dorrie looked disappointed.

‘Then why didn’t you take me round that way,’ she said, ‘instead of here, where we can’t see anything?’

‘Nurse wouldn’t have given us leave to go out on the road by ourselves,’ said Amy. ‘We were only to play in the grounds. Besides, it was about here we met the little dog, not at the front, and I thought you wanted so much to see him.’

‘So I do,’ said Dorrie. ‘But how can we see him? If you were to call him, Amy, or whistle, do you think he would come?’

‘No,’ said Amy. ‘I don’t think that would do. But there’s nothing to prevent us going along by the side of the palings till they stop, or till we come to a door or opening of some kind; for there must be one, because of old Giles going through. And even the little dog—he must have got out somewhere!’

‘Do let’s go, then,’ said Dorrie, slipping her hand again into Amy’s and drawing her sister towards the palings.

‘Well,’ said Amy, moving on slowly, ‘if

you'll promise not to be frightened at anything, nor to scream out if you hear the least rustle among the leaves, as Viva does.'

'Of course I won't,' said Dorrie; 'but do come quick, Amy.'

They had again to walk singly when they got close up to the palings, and to talk in whispers, for Amy was very much afraid of being overheard by any one on the other side, so this part of their progress was not very amusing. And more than once Amy was on the point of giving it up, as she saw no sign of the palings coming to an end.

'And, after all,' she said to herself as a new idea suddenly struck her, 'perhaps Giles comes through by some opening on the *left* of the closed gates, nearer our side. Very likely he does.'

But just as she was thinking of turning back, she caught sight, through the tangle of brushwood, of a narrow but unmistakable path, apparently leading towards the back of the Towers. A short but rather severe scramble

got herself and her little sister through the bushes.

‘I wonder if this is the way Giles comes,’ said Amy, looking up and down the path. ‘I don’t believe it can be, even if it does lead to the Towers. It would take him too long. Come along, Dorrie; we may as well follow it a little to see where it goes to.’

To nowhere, apparently; for in a minute or two the path narrowed and gradually seemed lost in the undergrowth.

‘How stupid!’ said Amy impatiently. ‘But’—peering about her—‘I do believe, Dorrie, the palings have come to an end! Perhaps they’re not needed here, the bushes are so thick. If only I could get through I should soon find out. You stay here a minute, Dorrie; my frock is much stronger stuff than yours. I *must* find out about those palings, and see if we can’t squeeze through, so as to get a sight of the garden and the views from this side.’

Dorrie made no objection. She was dreadfully afraid of Amy thinking her a coward.

‘You won’t be long, Amy,’ was the only thing she said as her sister left her.

Amy found it even tougher work than she had expected; and though she satisfied herself that the palings *had* come to an end, there was not much advantage to be got thereby. It would be quite impossible to press through farther without risk of serious damage to her clothes, if not to her skin, and evidently the thick growth she was now standing in here extended for some distance.

‘I must go back to Dorrie,’ she said to herself; ‘and I suppose we had better look for Giles’s path nearer our own house.’

So she turned back to the more open ground where she had left her little sister. But, short as the distance really was, it was not very easy to hit the direction accurately. And when she first caught sight of the path again, she thought

she must have made a mistake, for no Dorrie was to be seen.

‘Dorrie, Dorrie,’ she cried, forgetting all her precautions in her anxiety to find the child, ‘where are you?’

But there was no reply. Amy ran down the path for some little distance, in vague hopes that the spot where she had left Dorrie was farther on; but this idea she soon had to give up, for the track grew wider and clearer, whereas at the point where the child was to wait it had all but dwindled into nothing.

‘It is very *naughty* of Dorrie,’ she said to herself, growing angry, as people often do when becoming anxious. ‘She really might have stood still for a few minutes! Where can she have gone to? If she’s anywhere among the shrubs close by, she can’t but have heard me call.’

And feeling it almost useless to retrace her steps, she ran on a little farther. Suddenly the path widened still more, and in another moment she saw that, just before her, it forked, another well-

beaten track branching off from it back again in the direction of the Towers ; and in the distance the faint sound of a dog barking seemed to tell what had tempted her little sister to desert her post.

Half-relieved, yet still uneasy, Amy turned into the new path, calling again, though more softly, and stopping from time to time for a second to listen for the dog's bark, and possibly for the sound of the child's voice, which once or twice she fancied she heard.

After all, she had not run very far before she found herself in front of a small wicket-gate leading into a little piece of unused ground, bounded by a wall, in which a door stood half-open.

With scarcely a moment's hesitation—for now all her other feelings were drowned in eagerness to find Dorrie—Amy ran through the little gate, across the few yards between, and peeped through the half-open door. In front of her lay an old courtyard, evidently unused and all but deserted for long, as the grass and moss had

it all their own way between the ancient cobblestones with which it was paved. One or two broken-down kennels, pushed aside into a corner, struck her with a curious melancholy. How many years must have passed since their four-footed tenants had leaped out, with rattling chains and deep-braying voices, to welcome their master's return ; how long, how very long, since the sound of whirring wings and gentle cooing round about the half - ruined dovecot at the other side had broken the silence !

‘How terribly sad it seems !’ thought Amy ; ‘but oh, how interesting ! If only Dorrie hadn’t run away we might have so enjoyed it, and most likely nobody would have seen us.’

But now all pleasure in her exploring was gone—find Dorrie she must, even at the risk of positive disobedience to the restrictions that had been laid on her. She crossed the courtyard in the direction where rose the now familiar Towers, though, seen from this side, they appeared far less ruinous. Evidently the

fire which had destroyed so much of the old house had left the back part of the premises less injured than the front, for a doorway, also ajar, led into a stone passage in perfectly solid condition. It was vaulted and rather dark. One or two doors, the handles of which Amy tried to turn, refused to yield to her touch. They evidently communicated with the house, and were locked. But a sharp turn in the passage showed bright sunlight before her; and in a moment it flashed across her that the figure she and Kenelm had seen from the other side must have emerged from the place where she now was.

She stood still, her heart beating fast with a strange mixture of excitement, curiosity, and fear. Could any harm have come to Dorrie? Whose had been the strange figure they had caught sight of? Was there *really* any mystery, any uncanny secret, about the place? As she hesitated, again, greatly to her relief, she heard the short, sharp bark of a little dog, quickly followed by an authoritative voice:



A tall figure in black was stooping over him and holding him back.

‘Down, Shag, down!’—then in a different tone: ‘I will show you the way back, dear; but you must not’——

Amy did not distinguish the rest of the words, but the answer that followed was in Dorrie’s voice. She seemed to be speaking half-timidly, and Amy hesitated no longer. She ran forward, coming suddenly upon the little group in the sunlight at the entrance of the arched passage.

At the first moment she was not seen except by the little dog, who immediately began barking again, though he could not run towards her, as a tall figure in black was stooping over him and holding him back. But almost immediately his frantic efforts to break away and rush forward to welcome the new-comer—his idea of correct hospitality—caught his mistress’s attention. She raised herself and turned round sharply, and in an instant Amy recognised her. Yes—it was the girl they had seen in the square gardens!



CHAPTER X.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.



HE face was the same—the pretty features and bright brown hair; she was even dressed all in black, as she had then been. But yet—Amy hesitated after the first glance—her expression was so different. *Then*—that first day—it had been almost the most attractive thing about her. She had looked so gentle, though sad, and a slight smile had lighted up her face as she passed the two little sisters on the garden bench.

But *now* she looked cold and stern, almost

haughty, as her glance fell on Amy, whose self-possession was not increased by feeling herself untidy and hot, and with a general look of having found her way in anything but a correct fashion.

‘Who are you?’ said the young lady; ‘and why have you made your way in here?’

‘I’—— began Amy; ‘I came to find my little sister.—Dorrie,’ turning to her, ‘it is all your fault. Why didn’t you stay where I left you?’

‘I ran after the little dog,’ said Dorrie. ‘You know you promised me we should see the little dog. We came on purpose.’

The girl’s face did not lighten at this.

‘How did you know anything about my dog?’ she said. ‘Surely your people don’t know of your running about in this wild way?’

Amy’s heart beat faster and faster. She was beginning to feel indignant now, as well as frightened, for she was a very proud-spirited

child, and did not at all like being spoken to in this tone.

‘Your little dog ran to meet us the other day,’ she said. ‘That wasn’t our fault, and it wasn’t wrong of me to tell Dorrie about him. He should be tied up if you don’t want any one to see him.’

A slight change of expression came over the girl’s face at these words.

‘Please, don’t be angry,’ said Dorrie, catching, with a child’s quick instinct, the softened look. ‘You weren’t angry before Amy came, and she had to look for me.’

‘I don’t mind your seeing my dog,’ said his mistress. ‘Why should I? But any one would have been surprised at—at children like you rushing into private grounds in this way. Is there no one with you to take care of you?’

Her tone was by this time much softer than her words, and Amy’s first flush of angry feeling began to cool down, for in her heart she knew that she had been to blame.

'Of course. There is nurse, and mamma only went away two or three days ago. Our governess can't come just yet, and I said I would take care of Dorrie this afternoon, because nurse was busy, and Viva—that's my other sister—was tired. But we won't ever come back again, if—if you don't want us to; only please don't write a letter to nurse or anything like that. She'd be angry, and she'd write to mamma, who is in London; and here Amy's voice was broken by something very like a coming sob.

The girl in black looked at them hesitatingly.

'I don't want to get you into any trouble,' she said; 'but still, it isn't right for children to conceal anything they do from their parents.'

'I'll tell mamma,' Amy burst out eagerly. 'I promise you I will—I'll tell her myself as soon as ever she comes back. She'll be coming again soon. But *please* don't tell any one else—not old Giles; he would be so cross.'

The girl smiled.

'Giles?' she repeated, raising her eyebrows a little. 'Giles is only a servant. You have no reason to be afraid of him in any way. If'—— but here she stopped. 'Well, then,' she went on again after a moment's pause, 'shall we make a contract? I will not mention having seen you to any of your people, and you, on your side, will not speak of it either—*except* to your mother, to whom you will tell all about it as soon as you see her.'

'Yes, yes,' said Amy. 'Dorrie, you quite understand?'

Dorrie nodded her head.

'We needn't tell 'cept only mamma,' she said. 'But I would like to see the pretty garden,' she went on coaxingly, as she glanced in front of her.

Amy touched her sister's arm.

'No, dear,' she said quickly, for she was very much afraid of any revelations from the child as to what she herself and Kenelm had

espied from the front. 'No, dear, we mustn't give any more trouble.'

'I will take you a little way round the garden instead of through the passage,' said the young lady—and by her manner Amy saw, to her relief, that Dorrie's mention of the garden had not made her suspect any previous acquaintance with it—'and then you had both better run home as fast as you can.'

'We needn't go home just yet,' Dorrie said, with a child's persistency, now that she was feeling quite on friendly terms with their hostess; but again Amy checked her.

'Hush, Dorrie!' she said; 'we can play in our own garden;' for she saw that Shag's mistress was by no means anxious to prolong their visit; though it was not till the little girl thought it all over by herself afterwards that she quite realised that the young lady's wish to keep this afternoon's occurrences secret was quite as strong as Amy's own.

The girl turned without again speaking and

led the way across the pretty lawn, and along one or two garden paths which led back again towards the house and the courtyard. Before entering it she stood still for a moment.

‘You have a good view of the other side of the Towers from here,’ she said.

Both children looked up. Suddenly Amy gave an exclamation.

‘Who is that—looking out of that window?’ she cried, forgetting her discretion in her surprise, as she pointed upwards.

Their guide’s eyes followed the direction of Amy’s, while her face flushed and she murmured some words which Amy did not hear, but which told of annoyance.

‘There is no one at the window,’ she then said shortly; nor was there any longer.

‘Oh, but a moment ago,’ went on Amy, ‘I *did* see a face up there—up at the corner. A *very* white face’—and her own grew rather pale as she spoke—‘and there can’t be any rooms in that very ruined part, are there?’



‘Who is that—looking out of the window?’

Gladys—for such was their hostess's name—glanced at her again somewhat coldly.

‘You can find your way home from here,’ she said, opening a door in the wall of the courtyard, on the other side from that by which they had come in. ‘Cross the yard to the door you came in by, then follow the path through the little gate *quite* straight on till it comes out on the old drive. You need not go near the palings at all ; your little sister told me you had scrambled along by them. Good-bye !’

‘Thank you,’ said Amy, meekly enough ; and taking Dorrie’s hand, she hurried across the cobble-stones, rather uncomfortably conscious that the young lady stood watching them till they were out of sight.

They had no difficulty in finding their way back ; and once they had reached the old drive Amy slackened her pace.

‘Why have you run so fast ?’ said Dorrie. ‘I’m quite out of breath. She wasn’t angry with us at the end.’ . . .

‘Don’t speak about her,’ said Amy rather sharply. ‘It *was* a good deal your fault, you know, Dorrie ; and you’d better try to forget all about it. If you speak of it to me you’ll go on remembering it.’

Dorrie did feel herself to blame, so she received this advice without remonstrance.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘There’s only just one thing, Amy. I do wonder who it was we saw looking out of the window !’

‘Did you see it too ?’ said Amy in surprise. ‘I didn’t know you had done so.’

‘Oh yes,’ replied Dorrie in rather an awe-struck tone. ‘It was such a very white face ; it rather frightened me, Amy.’

‘Nonsense,’ said her sister. ‘Why should a white face be more frightening than a red face ? Don’t get like Viva, always being frightened !’

Dorrie sighed, but did not reply.

‘What’s the matter now ?’ said Amy.

‘I’m so sorry not to see the little dog again,’ answered the child. ‘He was so sweet !’

He really seemed to 'vite me to run in after him.'

'Well, you must forget about him too,' said Amy decidedly; and after that she scarcely spoke again till they were inside their own garden.

It was much too early to go in; so, partly out of kindness, partly to put the events of the afternoon a little out of the child's mind, Amy ran in for a story-book, and then, finding a comfortable corner out of any draught, she read aloud to Dorrie for an hour or more.

Notwithstanding her advice to her little sister to try to put all that had happened out of her head, Amy herself made no attempt to do anything of the kind. Indeed, her mind was more absorbed than ever, naturally enough, by what it must be allowed even a less fanciful person could not have denied was a real mystery. She longed, as she had never longed before, to be free to talk it all over with the others, especially with Viva, as it was she who would have the most sympathised in the strangeness

of the discovery that the girl now living at the Towers was actually the one whose remarks in the square gardens had so impressed them. And the more Amy thought it over the more convinced she became that there was something curious and out of the common about the whole.

‘I am *sure*,’ she thought to herself, ‘that she was *very, very* afraid of our talking about her to any one. Though she is really kind and good too, for she didn’t think it was right to make us promise to keep any secret from mamma. And yet she didn’t seem afraid for herself. She had a proud sort of way, as if she were the head of everything there; so it can’t be that she’s being kept a prisoner against her will, or anything of that kind. Besides, what we heard her say the first time we saw her showed that she was going to Greyling of her own wish. No, I can’t make it out—above all, that face at the window. For of course there was a face, though the person drew back so quickly—as soon as he or

she saw us with the girl, I dare say. It's *more* like as if some one was kept a prisoner there, that she had come to be kind to, or to hide.'

Yes, this last supposition seemed to fit.

'If only,' thought Amy again, 'there were civil wars and rebellions going on now, it would be quite easy to explain. But all these *nice* sort of history things never happen now. I do so wonder what Ken would think if only I could tell him all.'

The temptation to 'tell Ken all' was to become much greater than she had any idea of. That very evening after tea he asked her to come out with him a little, adding in a whisper: 'I've something rather queer to tell you, Amy.'

Amy sprang up eagerly; but the next moment, remembering how her own lips were sealed, she drew back half-hesitatingly.

'I'm rather tired,' she said. 'I'm not sure if I want to go out again.'

'As you like,' said Kenelm, in what he meant to be a very indifferent tone, though

in reality he was very disappointed and surprised. '*I don't care; but I never did see any one so changeable as you.*'

'*I'm not changeable,*' said Amy indignantly. '*And it's true I'm rather tired; but I will come out with you, Ken, if you don't want to go far. You know there's nothing I like so much as being alone with you.*'

Kenelm allowed himself to be quickly mollified; and, to tell the truth, his private information was like a penny burning a hole in his pocket till he could get rid of it.

So the two sauntered out together.

Kenelm did not speak till they were some little way from the house in the direction of the kitchen-garden.

'*Won't you come round to the front?*' said Amy, who had followed him half-absently, not quite taking in which way he was going. For the time being she felt as if she had had enough of that part of the shrubberies which lay to the rear of both houses.

‘No,’ Kenelm replied. ‘I’ve a particular reason for going this way. I got something out of old Giles to-day, Amy—more than he knew, I fancy. To begin with, I know how he comes round to us from the Towers, and I want to see it for ourselves.’

Amy stopped short. She had no wish to retrace her route of the morning, for she felt sure the path Kenelm wished to explore was the one on the other side of the old drive, along which, by the young lady’s directions, she and Dorrie had come home. It would be too dreadful, she thought, to risk the possibility of being again seen prying about the premises that very same day by Shag’s mistress, who, after all, had been kind to them.

‘I’d rather not go that way,’ she said. ‘It might seem like trespassing, and I’m very afraid of meeting Giles.’

‘What has made you so particular all of a sudden?’ said Kenelm. ‘There’s no fear of meeting him. He’s gone off to the village,

and he won't be back till late. And as for trespassing, that's all nonsense. The way I want to go is for a good part of it close to our own wall, and we've never been forbidden to go there.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Amy in a tone of relief; 'then you mean that Giles comes round by some path on *this* side of the old drive? How does he get through the palings?'

'He doesn't need to get through them at all,' replied Kenelm. 'They don't run the whole way. It's almost like a wood farther along, the trees grow so thickly—you'll see. He passes by that queer, sticking-out place below your window—at least he often does. I don't know that he always comes the same way. But there *is* a way below our wall; that's the point.'

They were close to the little door in the kitchen-garden by this time. Kenelm opened it, and they passed through, turning at once to the left and skirting along the wall instead of

moving off in the direction of the old drive. The cleared space was too narrow for them to walk abreast, and for a few minutes neither spoke, till they rather suddenly came out into a somewhat more open space.

‘Look,’ said Kenelm. ‘Here’s the “lean-to,” or whatever you call it; and up there is your own window, Amy.’

‘Oh yes!’ exclaimed his sister. ‘How very stupid of us never to have thought of coming round this way before! I wonder we’ve never seen Giles passing or heard him early in the morning.’

‘I don’t fancy he comes right under the window,’ said Kenelm. ‘As far as I could make out, he turns off a little before this;’ and, again followed by Amy, he retraced his steps a short way. ‘Yes,’ he exclaimed, ‘here it is!’ and he ran along a scarcely visible foot-track joining the one skirting the wall which they had come by a few yards back.

And before long they found themselves at a

spot, still in shrubbery, though much less thickly grown, through which at a little distance they could see the gleam of the smooth-cut, bright-green lawn surrounding the ruins.

‘Hullo!’ said Kenelm. ‘I’d no idea it was as near as this by this way. You see, Amy, we’ve got a good bit on the inside of the palings, as it were; so, by rights, we shouldn’t be here. But there’s no fear of meeting any one.’

‘I don’t know that,’ said Amy in a low voice, catching hold of her brother’s arm; ‘and *please* don’t speak so loud, Ken. I can’t stay here; I really can’t. Do—do come back!’

She turned as she spoke, and hurried along till close to their own wall again; and Kenelm, though half-unwillingly, ran after her,

‘I don’t know what’s made you get so frightened,’ he said. ‘You’ve quite changed. You haven’t even asked me what I found out from Giles.’

‘Oh,’ answered Amy, ‘I thought you only

meant you had found out this way to the Towers.'

She was standing close beside the ivy-covered jut-out from the wall as she spoke, looking at it curiously.

'I wonder what there is inside,' she went on.

'That's just what I was going to tell you about,' said her brother. 'I'm *almost* certain, from what Giles said and did not say, that it's an underground passage of some kind.'

'Really!' exclaimed Amy, with the greatest interest, all her hesitation vanishing. 'How wonderful! Do tell me exactly what he said, Ken.'

'I led him on,' said Kenelm, 'by talking of other old places where there were all sorts of mysterious secret rooms and staircases. And he couldn't help hinting that Greyling was not "behind" other old places, and bit by bit he let out that there *is* a secret way between the two houses—why it was made I don't believe he knows. But, putting two and two together,

Amy, I really do think it's through that doorway in our schoolroom.'

Amy clasped her hands together in immense excitement.

'Oh Ken,' she exclaimed, 'if we could but find out!'

And in her heart she added :

'If I could but tell him all I know—above all, about the face at the window!'

The mystery was to be solved for them in a way they little dreamt of.





CHAPTER XI.

THE TAPPING AT THE DOOR.



UT in the meantime there did not seem to be anything more to be done in the way of 'finding out.' Amy's lips were sealed by her promise, and Kenelm had not much hope of getting more 'out of old Giles.'

'He'll probably shut up again tighter than ever, because he'll be vexed with himself for letting out anything,' said the boy to his sister.

Then he picked up a stone and began knocking on the 'lean-to,' 'to see if it sounded hollow.'

‘Of course it is hollow,’ said Amy. ‘There wouldn’t be a doorway into a block of bricks.’

So Kenelm threw down his stone again; he had not even the satisfaction of hearing that it *did* ‘sound hollow,’ for the thick growth of ivy deadened his blows.

And the two moved away.

‘It is too soon to go in yet,’ said Amy. ‘This is the time of day it seems so dull without mamma. Even Miss Sheppard would be better than nobody. Let’s go round by the front a little, Ken—not close up to the gate, but near enough to have a view of the ruins from that side.’

She was far too much on her guard now to risk being seen by any of the inhabitants of the Towers, but yet the fascination of the whole was stronger than ever. The grace and beauty of ‘the girl of the square gardens,’ now that she had seen her again, were added to the attraction of the mystery; and the pale face at the window would not leave her imagination.

So, 'Let us just go near enough to see the house again from the front,' she repeated.

Kenelm made no objection, but an amendment.

'I believe we might get round this way quite easily,' he said, 'without crossing the open part. If we keep as near as we can to our own side, nobody could blame us if they did see us. It's such a round to go back through our kitchen-garden and out again to the front by our drive;' and he turned as if about to carry out his own idea.

But Amy stopped him.

'No, no,' she cried; '*don't* go that way, Ken. We can run round by our garden and out on to the road in a very few minutes.'

And her brother, feeling perhaps that he had been something of a deserter from his sisters that day, gave in, though not without again remarking that Amy had grown 'awfully fussy' about not trespassing.

It took them a very short time to run round.

They walked more slowly again when they came out on to the high-road.

'I wonder if this was a coaching road in the old days,' said Kenelm. 'I can ask Giles *that*, any way.'

'I should not think it ever was,' Amy replied. 'It's too out-of-the-way.'

'Oh, but you don't understand,' said Kenelm. 'The coaching roads sometimes ran past very out-of-the-way places; not to stop at them, but to avoid hills, and if the way was more direct. Just like railways now. And besides that, places that *now* seem out-of-the-way weren't always so; some quite big towns have grown into villages only since the railways have altered the traffic. I believe this *was* a coaching road, it's so well made—no ruts or holes.'

'What you say is rather contradictory,' said Amy, who loved an argument. 'If the

coaches'——but here she suddenly stopped short; the sound of wheels approaching very fast behind them made her start.

'Do you hear, Ken?' she said. 'Isn't it odd, just as we were speaking about coaches in the old days, that we should hear a carriage coming, for it is so *very* seldom that any pass this way? And it isn't a cart; it's a large carriage with two horses. Suppose,' she went on laughingly—'suppose it was the ghost of an old mail-coach, Ken! It is driving so fast—look what a cloud of dust!'

'A ghost-coach would certainly not raise the dust, nor make any sound,' said Kenelm, 'and it would have four horses at least. It's just a fly from the station, Amy; but there are a pair of horses, and it *is* driving very fast. Let us stand still and watch it pass.'

'Can it be going to our house?' said his sister, looking a little alarmed.

'No, of course not. It would have turned in already;' and as the carriage flew past them he added: 'There's just one person in it—an old gentleman, as far as I can see; and—yes—it's going to the Towers. We had better not go any farther, Amy. It may be coming back again.'

'All right,' said his sister; 'but I do wonder who it can be. Did he look like a doctor, Ken, do you think?'

'I don't know,' said Kenelm. 'I only just saw that it was a man with gray hair. Why didn't you look yourself, Amy?'

Amy did not reply. She could not explain that what had put a 'doctor' into her head had been the sight of the thin white face at the window, which must, she felt sure, have been that of some one who was or had been very ill indeed.

So she said nothing, and the two walked home again almost in silence—Kenelm thinking to himself that there was something

decidedly 'funny' about Amy's manner; Amy wondering in her own mind, more than she had ever wondered before, what all the mystery at the Towers really was about. For she was more and more convinced that a mystery there was, and that the girl they had seen had some very serious reason indeed for not wishing her presence at Greyling to be known.

The rest of the evening passed quietly, and any stranger glancing in at the trio seated round the schoolroom-table would have thought them a picture of content. But as a matter of fact Amy was feeling low-spirited and uneasy. It was the first time in her life that she had ever really had anything 'on her mind,' and she longed to be able to speak of it. This, however, was impossible. Dorrie was the only one to whom at present she could have spoken of it without breaking her word, and Amy was sensible enough to feel that the less

said to Dorrie the better. The little girl had not been nearly so much impressed by their curious adventure as Amy, and already the common little events of the day had begun to make her forget about it. She had gone to bed much more interested about her doll's new hat than anything else; which Amy was very glad of.

'Oh dear!' the elder sister exclaimed suddenly that evening, 'I do wish mamma would come back again. It is so dull without her.'

She was, as I have said, in the school-room with Kenelm and Viva — Doff and Dorrie having gone to bed.

Her brother glanced up quickly. Amy's face was pale and tired-looking. He felt rather sorry for her. Could she be going to be ill?

'If I tell you something,' he said, 'you'll promise not to be very disappointed if it doesn't happen.'

'Yes,' said Amy eagerly, 'I'll promise.'

‘Well then,’ he said, ‘it’s quite possible—more than that, very likely—that papa and mamma will come down on Saturday to spend Sunday with us. She told me at the station. It wasn’t a secret; she left me free to tell you if I saw you were getting dull, and you are down in the mouth, somehow, Amy.’

‘Oh, how glad I am!’ she exclaimed. ‘How I *do* hope they’ll come! Even if they don’t, Ken, I’m awfully glad you told me, just to hope for it, you know. I do want mamma so.’

‘How funny you are, Amy!’ said Viva. ‘I love mamma just as much as you do, but I’m quite happy like this.’

‘Well, I’m not, then,’ said Amy; ‘and’——

She was interrupted by a slight scream from Viva.

‘There it is again,’ she cried; and, in answer to Amy’s ‘What?’—‘A mouse,’ she replied; ‘at least I hope it is only a mouse and not a rat,’

with a shudder. 'I heard it this evening when you and Ken were out. It's behind the locked door.'

They all listened. Then Amy ran to the mysterious door and put her ear to the keyhole.

'No,' she said, 'I don't hear anything. Yes, there is a sort of rustle, but it's very faint;' and when Kenelm tried he could hear nothing.

'You're too silly,' he said to Viva. 'Of course there *must* be mice, and perhaps rats too, in an old place like the Towers. But as long as they keep to cellars and places like that, what does it matter? Not that they'd hurt us if they did come out.'

'Oh, but I can't *bear* them,' said Viva, with a shiver. 'I do hope I shan't dream of them.'

'We must go to bed now, whether you do or not,' said Amy. 'It's past half-past eight. Come along, Viva.'

Amy was tired. She fell asleep quickly, and slept more heavily perhaps than usual, for she was much more easily awakened than Viva, as a

rule. And certain sounds, which in an ordinary way would have aroused her immediately, had been repeated more than once before they did so; though when she did awake she was conscious that she had been hearing them 'through her sleep,' as people say, for some little time. Her first drowsy ideas went back to what they had been speaking about just before bedtime—Viva's rats and mice. But no—rats or mice it could not be. It was a very distinct tapping—a tapping that had a meaning in it. It said quite plainly, 'Let me out,' or 'Let me in,' and it came from below, from the schoolroom.

Amy's heart began tapping too—that is to say, beating much faster than usual. For a moment or two the tapping ceased, and she hoped it might be going to leave off; then she would *try* to think it had been the window-blind or something, and go to sleep till the morning, when it would seem nothing to be frightened of. But no, there it was again! She could bear it no longer.

‘Viva,’ she said; but Viva went on breathing regularly. ‘Viva,’ more loudly; but Viva only muttered something drowsily, and turned round on her pillow. ‘It is no use,’ thought Amy; ‘it would take ever so long to awake her, and then she’d be too frightened to be any good. I must go to Ken;’ and, trembling too much to think of slippers or dressing-gown, she slid out of bed and made her way to the door, for there was moonlight enough, though faint, to see her way.

Kenelm’s room was on the same floor, and he was a very light sleeper. A word or two awoke him, and a very few more told him all there was to tell.

He was out of bed in an instant.

‘Listen,’ said Amy; ‘I think you can hear it even here;’ and she stood in perfect silence.

‘I fancy I hear *something*,’ said Kenelm; ‘but let us go back to your room and listen. And if you mean to go downstairs with me, Amy, you must put on some clothes,’ he him-

self by this time having lit a candle and half-dressed himself.

In Amy's room the tapping was unmistakable.

'Yes,' said Kenelm, 'I do believe it comes from that door. If you are frightened, Amy, don't come downstairs.'

He was rather pale himself, but evidently determined to be brave. Amy's own courage rose. She felt that it would be more than mean to desert him. Besides—she knew more than he did—it *might* be the girl herself, in some great difficulty, who had come to seek their help, if—as seemed almost certain—the mysterious door communicated with an underground passage from the Towers.

'Of course I will come,' said Amy; and the two set off downstairs together, and the more nearly they approached the schoolroom the more distinct grew the knocking.

Kenelm stalked in and put the candle on the table. There was just then a momentary lull. Then it began again. There was something

piteous as well as startling in the sound; the knocker seemed to be growing desperate. Kenelm stepped up to the door.

‘Who is knocking?’ he said; ‘and what do you want? Can you hear me?’

There was a smothered cry of relief; then a faint voice replied:

‘Let me in! I beg you, for pity’s sake, let me in! I won’t hurt you—I couldn’t! I am nearly fainting! Oh, *please* unlock the door!’

‘Is it unbolted on your side?’ asked Kenelm.

‘Yes—yes. I managed to draw the bolt some time ago; I couldn’t now.’

‘You must wait till we get the key, and it is in the stables,’ said Kenelm, speaking very plainly. ‘I will fetch it as quickly as I can. My sister will stay here and keep speaking to you;’ and a glance at Amy made her obey without hesitation.

‘Who are you?’ she said, her curiosity almost overcoming her fears. ‘You are not—not the young lady I saw to-day?’

‘No, no. That was Gladys, my cousin; I saw her speaking to you. She is away. Oh Gladys, why did you choose to-day to go? No, I am not Gladys; I am only a boy. I—I will tell you more when you let me out;’ and his voice sounded as if he were at the end of his endurance.

‘Keep up,’ said Amy; ‘you won’t have long to wait now;’ but in her heart she had some misgiving. She had not thought of telling Kenelm which of the outdoor keys was *the* one—he might be wasting time in perplexity. But no; Ken was very practical. He came back more quickly than she had dared to hope—for he had had to unbar the back-door to get out to the yard—with three keys.

‘*This* one,’ said Amy in a moment, for she had examined it well the day they tried the lock. ‘Quick, Ken; he seems fainting!’

Kenelm’s hands trembled, but he succeeded in turning the key. Then, with groans and squeaks in plenty from the old hinges, which

seemed as if resenting this disturbance of their many years' repose, the door yielded, opening backwards into the darkness behind, and half knocking down the figure leaning against the wall at one side.

They drew him in—for a moment or two thinking of nothing but how they could best attend to him. He was fully dressed, but shivering with cold, and it needed but a glance to see that he was, or had been, very ill, so pitiaibly thin and white did he seem. They led him to the one arm-chair and seated him in it, and Ken made a raid into the hall in quest of rugs and wrappers, which they huddled round him; and in a little the boy—a boy of sixteen or thereabouts he appeared—left off trembling so violently and tried to thank them.

'*The thing,*' said Kenelm, 'would be to get you something very hot to drink. I don't believe the kitchen fire is quite out; it's only eleven o'clock. I thought it was much later. I wonder what we could get?'

‘Nurse has some elderflower wine,’ said Amy eagerly, ‘that she keeps for colds, and she would know exactly what to do. Would you mind us calling her?’ she went on, for the sight of the boy’s still ghastly face alarmed her. ‘She is *very* kind.’

‘Would she—would she promise not to tell I was here—not till to-morrow?’ he said. ‘And—may I stay here, in this room, all night? I can’t go back—I’ve had rheumatic fever, and—oh dear! I don’t want to get it again;’ and he tried to smile.

‘Of course you must not go back,’ said Amy. ‘But can’t you tell us anything? What shall we say to nurse?’

The boy was silent; he seemed to be thinking deeply.

‘I’ll tell you all I can,’ he said, ‘and when Gladys comes back to-morrow *she’ll* tell you the rest—she’s my cousin. My name is Owen—Owen Dane—and she’s Gladys Dane, and the Towers is hers. She’s been taking

care of me there since I was so ill; but it had to be kept secret, because'—and here his pale cheeks flushed painfully—'somebody—I can't tell you who; Gladys must explain—is very angry with me, and won't see me or anything; he—he thinks I did something I really didn't do. I'd like you to believe me,' he went on, with a choke in his voice, for the intense sympathy in the children's faces touched him. 'I was only idle and silly. So I ran away, and I've been at sea; and then I got ill, and they put me in the hospital at Portsmouth, and I was nearly dying, and the chaplain wrote to Gladys, and—Gladys is an angel—she brought me here, and I've been getting much better. And nobody knew, except one lady. *He* didn't even know Gladys was here herself, and I can't think how he found it out; I am sure Mrs Roche would never tell. But Gladys had to go to London this afternoon, for one night; and after she had gone I saw a telegram that had come for her. I knew

she'd have wanted me to open it; but it was dreadful. It was from *him*, to say he was coming down this evening to see her. I don't know if he is aware I'm here, but he might have found it out. I dared not see him—besides, for *her* sake; if he *didn't* find out he couldn't blame her. So I didn't tell any one; I watched the door of the secret passage, and took the key in with me, and bolted it inside. It was left bolted at *this* end, but not at our end. And I stayed there, listening. I heard a carriage drive up, and voices—*his* and Giles's; but I couldn't hear what they said. So I thought I'd stay in the passage till the middle of the night, and then creep out and try to get to Giles's cottage—he'd have hidden me. But when I tried to undo the bolt at our end I couldn't - it hadn't been pushed in for so long till I did it, you see; I *couldn't* move it back again, and I was afraid of making a noise. It got colder and colder; so I felt my way along to this end—once, ever so long ago, Gladys

and I explored the passage right along—and at first when I rattled the door I thought it was open; the bolt wasn't so stiff as the other, and I wasn't so afraid of making a noise. I had two or three matches in my pocket, luckily, so I soon found the bolt; but after all it was locked on your side. So I knocked. I thought you'd let me in. I had seen the little girls talking to Gladys, and they seemed nice. It was the only thing to do—anything was better than *him* finding me. You *won't* tell—you'll keep it secret till Gladys comes, won't you ?'

His tone of entreaty was piteous. But now he seemed on the point of fainting again.

'Ken, we *must* call nurse,' said Amy; and Ken agreed with her. He held the candle at the door for Amy to see her way upstairs; and, once there, the moonlight came in from the uncurtained windows on the landing.

Nurse—as all nurses should be—was a light sleeper. She was wide awake and with all her wits about her in a moment; and though

very startled at first—she was so afraid that something was wrong with the children themselves—she was soon calm again, and able to take in Amy's extraordinary story. Amy made it as short as she could, of course; but it was necessary to give some explanation, so that nurse should share their pity for the poor boy who had taken refuge with them.

'I'll be down in an instant, Miss Amy,' she said, throwing on some clothes as she spoke. 'Here is the key of the sideboard. There's a little brandy there that your mamma left in case of need. Ask Master Ken to get it out.'

Amy hurried off with the key. But before they had time to get the sideboard unlocked nurse followed her.

'Poor dear!' said the kind woman, 'you *have* got a chill; but you'll be all right again directly. I've brought the little spirit-lamp down with me. We'll have some water heated in a minute. And now I'm here, Master Ken, you might run and see if you can stir up the

kitchen fire, so that we can get this young gentleman warmed up outside too. And then the best thing will be to get him to bed. You must lend him your bed for to-night, and I'll manage a make-up one for you.'

Kenelm was off almost before she finished speaking; and a few minutes later he came back to say that he had raked up the embers into a nice little blaze, and put on fresh coal, 'and without making scarcely any noise,' he added, for he quite understood that the fewer people who knew of Owen's visit the better.

By this time the poor boy was looking a little cheerier—nurse's hot drink had brought a tinge of colour into his face, and he had left off shivering. And the sense of safety and kindness about him had done as much good, perhaps, as anything else.

'I—I really don't know how to thank'——he was beginning, when there came a sound which startled them all—a loud ringing at the front-door bell; and, as if the ringer was too

impatient to wait even a moment, a loud knocking too, and the sound of voices speaking all together as if under great excitement.

Owen grew deathly pale again and sank down in his chair.

‘It—it is *he*!’ he exclaimed. ‘Grandfather! Oh, *what* shall I do?’





CHAPTER XII.

OWEN'S STORY.



AMY glanced round her hastily. 'Shall we try to hide you?' were the words on the tip of her tongue, when a gesture from Owen stopped her speaking.

'Gladys is there!' he exclaimed. 'I hear her voice. She must have come back by the last train after all; she said perhaps she would. She must have guessed I might be here, and she must have told grandfather. No, no,' as if in answer to Amy's unuttered question; 'it is no use hiding or anything. I must face

it out now, for *her* sake, too. I used not to be cowardly,' he went on, almost as if thinking aloud; 'it must be with having been ill.'

But a new strength seemed to have come to him in those few moments; partly, perhaps, the strength of desperation even more than of love and gratitude to his more-than-sister. *She* must not be blamed or suffer for his sake if he could save her. And the three stood there, silent and pale—for nurse had gone to open the front-door—Kenelm and Amy feeling that Owen was right, yet suffering, in their sympathy for him, almost more than he was suffering himself.

Then came a confused murmur of voices; and a tall figure in black rushed in, making straight for the refugee.

'Owen, Owen, my darling,' she cried, as she flung her arms round him, 'don't be startled. It's all right, dearest; all right at last.'

Her hat had fallen off, and her lovely bright hair seemed, as it caught the gleam of the

candles on the table, to have brought sunshine in with it. Owen held her tightly, but a strange new dignity had come to the boy. He glanced past her to a figure in the doorway—the figure of an old, somewhat bent man, with white hair and keen dark eyes, who stood there half hesitating, though nurse had not attempted to stop the entrance of these late visitors, including Giles, who had remained behind in the hall.

‘Gladys,’ said the boy, ‘how *can* it be all right, dear? Don’t think I’m afraid. I came in here mostly because I didn’t want *you* to be blamed.’

‘But no one is going to be blamed,’ said the girl, her voice shaking with earnestness. ‘Won’t you understand, Owen? Grandfather has come down to make everything happy again. Grandfather’—turning to the silent figure behind her, about which there was something that even the children, set against him though they were by their pity for the boy, felt to be sad and

touching—'grandfather, tell him—tell him that all is to be for'——

But Owen interrupted her, and interrupted also the words which the old gentleman was just about to utter.

'Stop, Gladys,' he said. 'I must say something first. I—I would give my life for things to be happy again, and I long for grandfather's forgiveness for what I *did* do wrong—my idleness and foolishness. But, grandfather, I can't take forgiveness for what I *didn't* do—that wicked, horrid thing you thought I did.'

The old man stepped forward, holding out his hand :

'I know, I know, my boy,' he said in a shaken voice; 'I—I have to ask your forgiveness. I know I accused you wrongfully; it has been proved. But I should have known you better; I should have trusted you. Even for Gladys' sake I should have trusted you. *She* could not love you so had you been capable of such a thing.'

'I wasn't going to say anything about "forgiving,"' said Gladys; 'I was going to say all is to be "*forgotten*." Owen, dearest, look at grandfather.'

For the old man stood there still, his hand extended in a position almost of humility.

Owen started forward and seized the hand. He had seemed half-dazed, for joy is very overwhelming sometimes — almost as overwhelming as sorrow.

'Grandfather, grandfather, say it again. I can't believe it yet. Say you know I didn't do it. Did you say it was proved I didn't?'

'Yes, yes, it *is* proved,' said Gladys. 'That boy Telford, whom I suspected, has confessed it. He pretended he was you, so as to get the money when grandfather was so ill.'

'Oh—oh Gladys!' exclaimed Owen. 'Oh grandfather!'

The old man seemed past words by this time. He made a sort of movement forwards and flung his arms round Owen, and for a moment or two

no one spoke. Amy was crying, and so, I think, was nurse. And Kenelm was looking the other way. The first person to recover her self-possession was Miss Dane herself—Gladys.

She turned to nurse, with a sweet smile on her still tearful face :

‘I am so sorry—so grieved to have startled you all so. And—we have been so taken up with our own affairs that no one has thought of apologising.’

Nurse was beginning to say something, when old Mr Dane, still with his arm thrown round his grandson, interrupted her.

‘Yes, indeed,’ he said. ‘We must explain everything to Mr and Mrs Landor. They are not here at present?’

‘No, sir,’ she replied; ‘but we expect them down to-morrow.’

‘I am very glad to hear it,’ said Gladys.

‘And I may tell mamma everything?’ said Amy, drawing nearer her half-timidly.

‘My dear child, I think it is *we* who must

tell everything, and ask her to forgive us for disturbing and frightening you all,' said the young lady, as she put her arm kindly round Amy.

'But excuse me, miss,' said nurse. 'I think the first thing to do is to attend to Master—Owen, is it not? He must be got to bed at once. You won't think of taking him home to-night? Master Kenelm's bed is all ready, and we will get hot-water bottles and whatever he needs.'

She did not speak too soon; for the poor boy was now quite exhausted by all he had gone through. With Giles's help, however—Giles looking more amiable than Ken and Amy had any idea he *could* look—they soon got him upstairs and comfortably to bed; Ken, very proud of being installed as Owen's watcher for the night, on a shake-down bed beside him.

'They were so good and brave,' Owen whispered to his grandfather as he bade him good-

night. 'I might have stayed in the underground passage till I fainted if they hadn't come down and let me out.'

Mr Dane shook Kenelm's hand warmly, and Gladys kissed Amy, promising to come back as early as possible the next morning, 'or *this* morning, I should say,' she added, 'for I am afraid it is past midnight.'

And then the house quieted down again as if nothing wonderful had happened. And through it all, Viva and Dorrie and Doff had been peacefully sleeping.

'I *know* I shall stay awake till the morning,' said Amy to nurse. 'My mind is so full of thinking. I can't believe the mystery is really explained, and I do so want to know all about it. What *do* you think the old grandfather thought poor Owen had done to make him so fearfully angry? And how do you think he found out that she—the young lady—was hiding him here—and'——

But nurse wisely shook her head.

'My dear Miss Amy,' she said, 'I haven't any idea. You must wait till to-morrow, when your dear mamma comes, and then you will be told all about it, no doubt. I am sure Miss Dane is a most sweet, kind young lady, and she will understand that you must want to have it all explained. And it's only fair you should, for you and Master Kenelm behaved very bravely; though, on the whole, I wish you had wakened me up first thing. Now, try to go to sleep, my dear.'

Amy said no more. Nurse's last words made her remember that there had been a good mixture of curiosity and love of adventure as well as courage in her way of acting. And on the whole, though of course she meant to tell her mother all about it, she did not feel sorry that nurse need not hear anything of her expedition within the forbidden limits with her little sister the morning before.

'There will be no secret or mystery now,' she said to herself. 'I can't help feeling rather

sorry it's all at an end. But I dare say Gladys will let us go all over the ruins and explore as much as we like. That *will* be fun. And we *must* go through the underground passage. I do wish Viva was awake! I wish it was the morning, so that I could call out to her and tell her everything, and what a lot she has missed by not waking up. I shall call to her as soon as ever I see the daylight coming in. I am sure I shan't'——

'Go to sleep,' were the words she never finished the sentence with, for—she heard no more, having fallen asleep just at that moment.

And she slept soundly—without dreaming—for she was really very tired. Wonderful to relate, Viva was up and half-dressed before Amy opened her eyes; for nurse, who had got up even earlier than usual to see how poor Owen had passed the night, had put her head in at the door to beg the younger sister to be very quiet and not awaken 'Miss Amy, as she had had a disturbed night.'

Viva was full of curiosity, but she was a conscientious little girl, and crept about like a mouse, so that Amy 'had her sleep out.' But when she did wake it took her some little time to collect her ideas. What had happened? Why did she still feel so much more sleepy and tired than usual? And—'Dear me,' she thought, 'there is Viva up and dressed!'

Viva's eager questions soon brought back to her mind the strange events of the night; and for once Viva was nearly as excited as Amy herself.

'I *wish* you had wakened me,' she said. 'It is really like a story in a book. Only,' she added prudently on second thoughts, 'I dare say I *should* have been very frightened.'

'Of course you would,' said Amy, rather scornfully; 'you'd have been perfectly useless. I dare say you would have screamed, and'——

A rather hot discussion was on the point of beginning, but nurse's return fortunately stopped it. She came to see if Amy was awake, and

to report that Master Owen was wonderfully well this morning. A messenger had been sent from the Towers already to inquire how he was, and to express hopes that his kind hosts were not the worse for their disturbed night.

‘How strange it seems,’ said Amy, ‘to hear of “a message from the Towers,” just like a message from anywhere, when you think of all the secrets and mysteries there have been!’

‘There are a good many mysteries still,’ said Viva. ‘I want to know *everything* now—what the grandfather thought Owen had done, and how he found out that Gladys had brought him here, and how the Towers belongs to *her* and not to her grandfather, and what the underground passage was made for at first, and’——

‘I don’t believe anybody knows *that*,’ said Kenelm; for they were all at breakfast by this time. ‘I’ve been asking Owen, and he says nobody can say for certain. They *think* it was a much longer passage once—ages ago—before this house was built—in some civil-war’s time.

And then, when this house was built and they came upon it, the little stair up to the door in the schoolroom was added, just to keep it as a sort of curiosity. There were near relations of the people at the Towers living here then ; and in rainy weather most likely they paid each other visits without having to go out. Of course, there has been no *secret* about it since then, as any one can see the out-jut in a moment.'

'And has Owen told you anything else ?'
Amy asked eagerly.

'No,' said Kenelm ; 'very little. He wants his cousin to tell it all when papa and mamma come. This much, however, I can explain. The Towers and this house—all the Greyling property — belong to Miss Dane through her mother's family. Her mother was the granddaughter or the great-granddaughter of the old squire who took off his hat to the Towers the last time he drove away—the story Giles told us, you know. Don't you remember he said it had come down in the female line ever since then ?'

'Yes,' said Amy, 'I remember. But, Ken,' she went on, 'have there always been mysteries about it? Why were we told at the very first that we might only walk in a certain part of the grounds?'

'Oh,' said Kenelm, 'simply because Miss Dane naturally likes to keep her own part private. She comes down sometimes for a picnic, or lends it to her friends, Owen says. No; there was no mystery about that, except in your head, Amy.'

Amy looked as if she could scarcely believe this.

'It was very wonderful, then, you must allow,' she said, 'my having such a feeling that there *was* a mystery from the very first.'

'But you've *always* been thinking about mysteries and mysterious things ever since I can remember,' said Viva. 'And this is the first time you've ever found one. So I don't think it *is* so very wonderful; do you, Ken?'

'It's like the old lady who peeped under her bed every night for a robber, and when at last

there was one—"You're what I have been looking for these fifty years," she said, Kenelm replied, laughing.

'And was she quite pleased then; and did the robber not hurt her?' inquired Viva, the matter-of-fact.

At this Amy could not help laughing too, though she had not felt quite so inclined to do so when she thought Kenelm was making fun of her, herself.

In the course of the morning Giles made his appearance with a Bath-chair to take Master Owen home, and a note for Amy from Miss Dane to ask if she thought Mrs Landor would be able to see her that afternoon; and as a letter by the morning's post had told the children to expect their father and mother by the middle of the day, Amy, by nurse's advice, sent a nicely written reply to invite the young lady to afternoon tea.

There was a great deal to tell her mother in the first place; and Amy, of course, told her



**'She has been so good and brave, I should like her to hear all
there still is to explain.'**

everything, and did not excuse herself for having been to some extent to blame. Nor did she disagree with what her mother told her—that though no harm, rather perhaps good, had come of her ‘mystery hunting’ this time, she must take care to keep her love of adventure within bounds, and never let curiosity or inquisitiveness about other people’s affairs get a mastery over her.

So when Miss Dane arrived, as Amy was sitting with her mother in the drawing-room, the little girl, after Gladys had kissed her affectionately, turned to leave the room.

Miss Dane looked disappointed.

‘May she not stay?’ she said to Mrs Landor. ‘She has been so good and brave, I should like her to hear all there still is to explain.’

‘Stay then, dear,’ said her mother; and Amy sat down again beside her new friend, who clasped the child’s hand in her own as if to give her courage; for, to tell the truth, Gladys herself was feeling a little nervous.

'I am so ashamed,' she began—'so ashamed and distressed that your children should have been so upset and disturbed by us. I cannot apologise enough, nor can my poor Owen—and indeed my grandfather too. We are most anxious to explain'——

'My dear young lady,' interrupted Mrs Landor, 'all's well that ends well. Do not think of any trouble to us. And pray do not think it necessary to explain anything, if it is painful to you to do so.'

Amy's face fell at these words. But she need not have been afraid; Gladys would do what she thought right.

'It is really not painful,' she said; '*not now*. And I think you have a right to hear all. May I begin at the beginning? Well then, I must tell you that Owen and I are first cousins, both orphans, and both "only" children. My father was grandfather's eldest—and favourite—son. He and my mother died when I was a baby, so I have always

been brought up — and that most carefully — by grandfather. Owen only came to us about five years ago, when *he* too became an orphan. He is seven years younger than I. I am nearly twenty-four. His father had — well, he had given grandfather a good deal of anxiety; and I think dear grandfather was a little prejudiced against Owen. I loved him dearly from the first; he is most lovable, and it was such a pleasure to me to have some one *young* with us. Owen is really a good, high-principled boy; but he has faults. He is — or was — too good-natured and easily led. He had had very little love in his life. He, like me, cannot remember his mother; and he is *too* anxious to be liked and cared for. All went pretty well, however, till he was sent to a big public school two years ago. Then he got into a rather idle set, and he became idle himself. One boy, called Telford, a really naughty boy, flattered

him up because he thought him rich. Grandfather is rich; and I'—with a little blush—'I am richer than Owen, for I have a large property here through my mother's family. But Owen is not rich; he is quite dependent on grandfather. He had a good allowance at school, and Telford got it nearly all out of him; and by his idle example he made Owen idle. He—Owen—is clever, and might easily have got a scholarship, and his missing this vexed grandfather greatly.

'Just about that time grandfather had a bad illness; and just as he was getting a very little better an awful shock fell on him. I need not tell you all the particulars; it would take too long. It was this. It came out somehow—through the lawyers, I think—that Owen had borrowed a lot of money from some low money-lenders—not really a *very* great deal, but a lot for a boy: twenty pounds or so—and

that he had got them to lend it to him by saying he was grandfather's heir, and that grandfather was dying, and he would soon be having a much larger allowance. Oh, it was awful! Owen was fetched away from school at once and faced with it, and he *utterly* denied it. But it was all so clearly proved—it seemed so, at least—that grandfather thought he was adding horrible falsehood to all the rest; and there was a fearful—oh! a *fearful* scene'—Gladys shuddered at the remembrance. 'And that night Owen ran away to sea, and we heard nothing of him for over a year.

'Think of it! And all through I believed Owen. I knew he could not be so false. My faith in him made grandfather very angry; and at last he went the length of forbidding me ever to name my cousin's name, or ever to see him again. I could not promise to obey him, though I said I would never speak of Owen to *him*

unless I was obliged. It was no use doing so, as it only kept up the irritation; and poor grandfather was still nervous and ill. Then the next year came new trouble. Three or four months ago my uncle, grandfather's only remaining son, who had long been in India, died, leaving no children. Besides the grief of it, it *was* hard on grandfather — Owen, the last of the family, in such disgrace! Some weeks after this news I at last heard from, or rather *of*, Owen. The surgeon of his ship wrote to say he was in hospital at Portsmouth, and, though convalescent, still very ill. I went down at once to see him, with my kind friend, Mrs Roche, who was at that time staying with relations in London—she was the lady you saw with me in the square gardens,' Gladys added, turning to Amy; for they had already compared notes the night before about their first glimpse of each other. 'I found Owen miserable, lonely,

and hopeless. They were kind at the hospital; but it seemed rough, and the doctor said he must have a change. So I made up this plan of bringing him here to my own place, though it *had* to be kept secret from grandfather. He was just about going to some baths for his health. I told him I was going to Mrs Roche's, where I *did* go first, and I asked him to write to me there. I was terribly afraid of his finding out about Owen, for fear of another awful scene, so I took every precaution against it. All I *hoped* was to get Owen well again. Once he was so, he said he must go back to sea, though he hated it. And then suddenly a wonderful thing happened. *Telford confessed*. He had pretended to be Owen, and had taken letters and papers of Owen's as proofs; and that was how he had got the money.

'Then, nearly a year later, he did something still worse—at least worse in a way;

he stole outright, and was expelled; and, in fear of being sent to prison, he confessed all. Grandfather returned home about three weeks ago, and only the day before yesterday this all came out. He set off at once for Mrs Roche's to see and consult with me, and found I was not there; but Mrs Roche now thought herself free to tell him that I was here with Owen, nursing him back to health. She wrote at once to tell me all, and *made* grandfather stay with her that night and part of the next day, to be sure of my having got the letter, so that we should not be frightened. But it only reached the Towers *this morning!* And grandfather's telegram, merely saying he was coming—he did not think it necessary to say “All right” or anything—as well as the letter, arrived when I had gone to London for the afternoon, half-intending to stay all night. *How* thankful I am I did not! And you know the rest

—how poor Owen opened the telegram—it was just addressed “Dane”—and the awful shock it gave him. And when *I* arrived I found grandfather nearly mad with anxiety, and I felt almost as bad. We searched everywhere and all in vain, till Giles thought of the underground passage, and we came here to ask leave to get into it from this side, as it was bolted inside at our end. But Owen would have fainted, and perhaps worse, if he had been left all that time; so you see how grateful we are to your dear children.’

She stopped at last, almost out of breath.

‘And now,’ said Mrs Landor gently, ‘all will be right again. Owen will never go to sea.’

‘Never,’ said Gladys. ‘Grandfather says he will keep him at home, to get quite strong, till he is old enough to go to college. Yes, thank God, all is right.’

She stooped to kiss Amy; perhaps it was partly to hide the tears in her eyes.

'And would you mind telling me,' said Amy, 'whom it was we saw in your garden one day, at the end of the archway, who looked like a nun?'

Gladys smiled.

'It was the hospital nurse I had for Owen,' she said. 'She had a stiff white cap, and she used to throw a little black shawl over it when she went out. She was very nice, but rather a coddle, Owen says he gets on better with only me. But now there will be no more secrets and mysteries; you must all run in and out of the Towers as if it was your own house. We want you all to come to tea to-morrow—you *must* all come,' she added, turning to Mrs Landor.

'And oh!' said Amy, clasping her hands in entreaty, '*may* we come by the underground passage?'

'Certainly you may,' said Gladys, laughing.

And Amy ran off to tell this delightful news—as well as Gladys's explanation of all the mystery—to her brothers and sisters.

‘It's more interesting,’ said Doff solemnly, ‘than all the fairy stories I've ever read.’

THE END.

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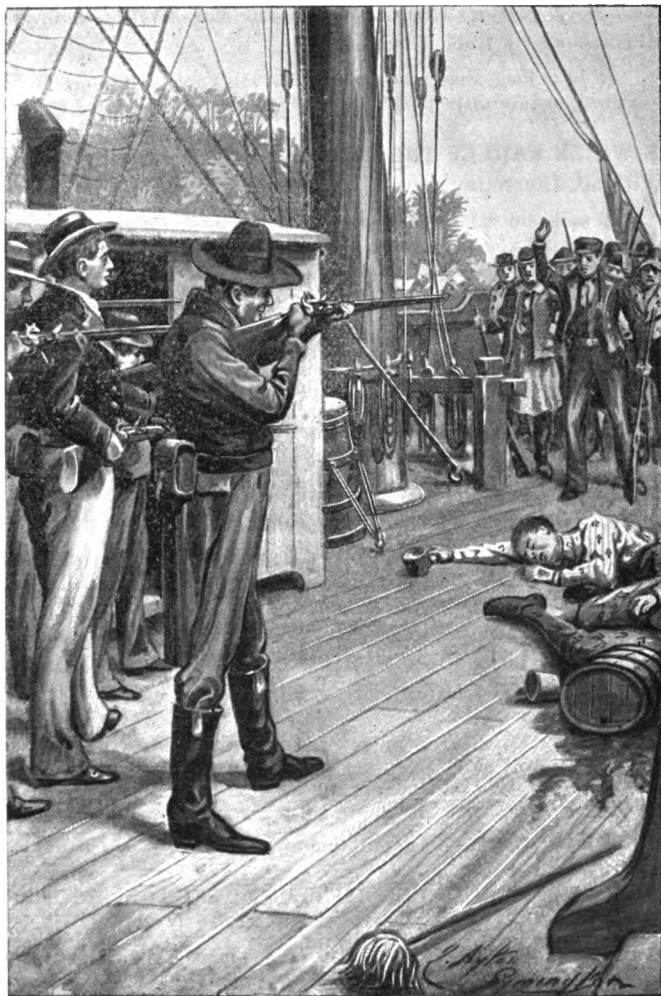
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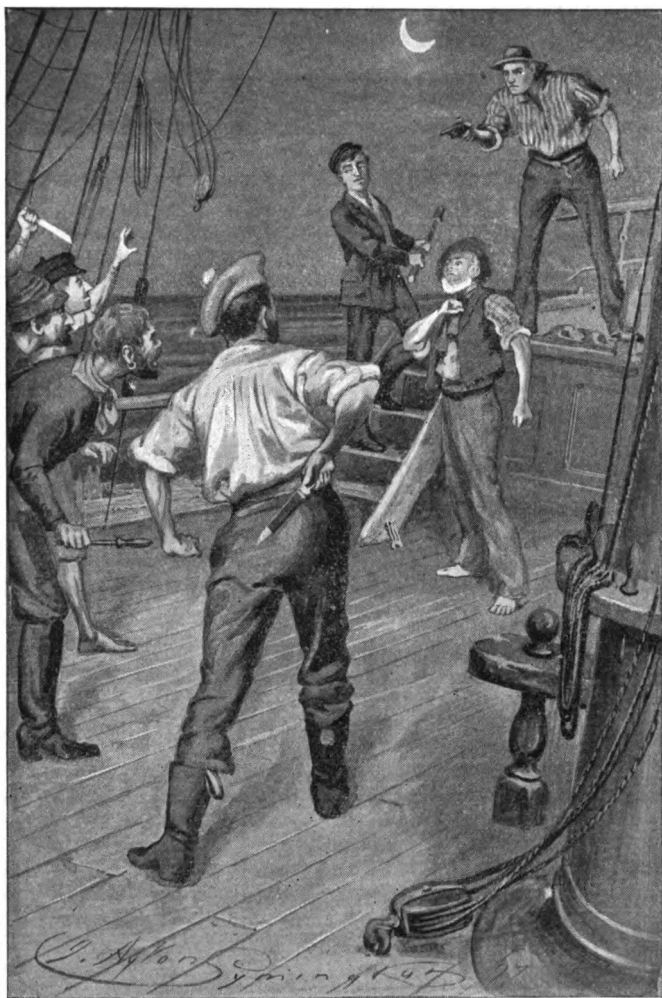
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